Merrimeg

William Bowen

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MERRIMEG

By WILLIAM BOWEN

THE ENCHANTED FOREST
Illustrated by Maud and Miska Petersham

THE OLD TOBACCO SHOP
Illustrated by Reginald Birch

SOLARIO THE TAILOR
Illustrated by J. Ormsbee

THE TWO GNOMES LED MERRIMEG AWAY.

MERRIMEG

BY

WILLIAM BOWEN

Illustrated by

EMMA BROCK

New York

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To
Marjorie Ann

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MERRIMEG AND THE CHIMNEY IMPS

MERRIMEG

MERRIMEG AND THE CHIMNEY IMPS

ONCE upon a time there was a little girl. Her name was Merrimeg.

Sometimes she was good, and sometimes she was naughty. But she was always merry.

One morning her mother gave her a little broom and told her to sweep the kitchen floor and her mother said, "Now, Merrimeg, be sure to sweep all the dust neatly into the dustpan, and carry it out to the cabbage garden. Will you do that?"

"Yes, mother," said Merrimeg.

"Don't sweep any dust into the corners," said her mother; and she left Merrimeg in the kitchen, and went into the front room to make the beds.

Merrimeg swept and swept with her little

broom, and she made up a little song and sang it out loud, keeping time with the broom.

Every little while her mother would call to her from the next room and say,——

"Have you finished yet, Merrimeg?"

"Not yet, mother!" Merrimeg would say, and then she would go on with her sweeping and singing.

She was very happy, but this wasn't her day to be good; for she was in a great hurry to be out in the garden in the sunshine, and she forgot all about what her mother had said to her; so instead of wasting time on the dustpan, she swept all the dust into the nice clean fireplace, a very large fireplace, big enough to roast a pig in. An iron pot was hanging there, but there wasn't any fire, and her mother had just cleaned off the hearth so that it was as spotless as new brick.

She swept the dust from under the table and chairs, and out of the corners, and everywhere. And every single bit of the dust she swept into the fireplace, and piled it up at the back on

the clean bricks, out of sight. And all the while she kept on singing.

She was stooping down into the fireplace, with her head right at the back, under the chim-

ney, when her mother called to her from the next room and said,——

"Have you finished now, Merrimeg?"

"Yes, mother!" said Merrimeg. "I'm going out into the garden now!"

But she didn't go out into the garden. Instead of that,—just as she said, "I'm going out

into the garden now,'' whack! she was knocked against the iron pot, and bang! she was tossed against the back of the fireplace, and whoof! she was whirled up into that black dirty chimney like a leaf in a wind.

And it *was* a wind, too! She was sucked up in a wind that was rushing up the chimney,—and *such* a wind! Never had she been caught in a wind like that, not even in the wildest March weather. Before she knew it, she was high up inside the chimney in the pitch dark, stuck fast, and the wind began to die down.

''Mother!'' she cried, at the top of her voice. But her mother couldn't hear her; and all that Merrimeg heard was a sound as if a great many people were laughing at her, a long way off.

It was pitch dark. But all around her, in the black soot of the chimney, were little sparks, like the sparks you see in the soot at the back of the fireplace when the fire is crackling on the hearth, —thousands of tiny sparks, and all of them getting dimmer as the wind died down more and more.

Suddenly the wind sprang up again, stronger and stronger, and the harder the wind blew the brighter the sparks burned. Merrimeg had to hold on fast with her feet and back to keep from being blown out of the top of the chimney.

She could see better now, and she saw what these sparks were. There were thousands of little black imps, sitting along the edges of the bricks in the walls of the chimney; and each spark was the head of a little black imp. She had to look close to see them, they were so tiny, but there they were, sure enough. She could hear them laughing, and it sounded as if a great crowd of grown-up people were laughing fit to kill, a long, long way off.

Every one of them was holding in his hands a wee mite of a bag with two handles, and when he would press these handles together a strong wind would come out of the bag and blow on his head, and make it burn bright like a spark of fire; and when he stopped pressing the handles of his wind bag his head would grow dim again. They were working away at a great rate, keeping their

heads alive, and the wind they made nearly blew Merrimeg up out of the chimney.

She didn't have much time to think about it, for all at once the imps stopped working at their wind bags, and the wind began to go down and their heads to grow dim, and before she knew what was coming Merrimeg felt these little imps, thousands of them, pounce on her, all over her, as thick as flies on honey, over her hair, and face, and arms, and legs, and dress, everywhere, and they were scratching and pinching, so that she screamed out in fright, and nearly fell down the chimney, for there was no wind now to hold her up.

But just then, when all the sparks had nearly gone out, the terrible little creatures suddenly stopped scratching and pinching and began to pump away at their wind bags like mad; for in another second their sparks would have been out, and that would have been the end of *them.*

That was what saved Merrimeg. The wind that sprang up from the wind bags was twice as

strong as it has been before. It caught her, and tore her loose, and picked her up, and whirled her up the chimney, right up to the top of it and *out*.

There she was, standing in the bright sunshine, on the roof of her own house, looking down into the cabbage garden.

It was a little house, only one story high, but it was too high for her to jump down to the ground; so she crawled to the edge of the roof, and sure enough there was the garden ladder standing against the front wall of the house, and it didn't take her more than a minute to clamber down the ladder and run to the door.

She knocked on the door and waited for her mother to let her in.

The door opened, and her mother stood in the doorway looking at her. When she saw the little girl who was waiting on the step she raised both her hands in astonishment and opened her mouth wide.

"Oh, mother!" cried Merrimeg. "Let me in, quick! I'm terrible sorry, and I've been up the

chimney, and I'll never, never do so any more, indeed I won't!"

"Why, child," said her mother, *"who are you?"*

"Let me in, mother!"

"Who are you, child?"

"Who am I? I'm Merrimeg, of course! Let me in!"

Her mother laughed. "Merrimeg!" she cried, and laughed louder than before. "You! The idea! You must be crazy! Why, child, you're as black as ink! My Merrimeg is as fair as a lily! I never saw you before!"

"Oh, mother!" cried Merrimeg. "I'm not black. I'm Merrimeg, and I want to come in!"

"Run away, child," said her mother. "I've no time to bother with strange children now. Run away home to your mother. I'm too busy to bother with you now."

When she had said that, she went back into the house, and closed the door after her. Merrimeg knocked at the door again and again, but it was

no use. Her mother would not pay any attention.

She cried to herself and walked away down the village street. No one knew her. She stopped two or three times, when she met children whom she knew, but they laughed at her and mocked her. They called her "Black face! Black face!" and she ran away.

She came to the end of the village street and went into the woods. She sat down beside a pool of clear water, to rest. She looked down into the pool. She was black.

Her dress was black too. Wherever the imps had touched her (and they had touched her all over) she was as black as chimney soot. She lay down on the grass and cried.

Then she jumped up and stooped over the pool to wash her face in the clear water. She scrubbed her face hard, and looked at it again in the water; and then she cried again, harder than before. Her face was still black; it wouldn't wash off!

She went on further into the woods, and she

really didn't care what became of her; she wouldn't care if she got lost and never came home any more; and if she never came home any more, oh! wouldn't her mother be sorry! She stopped to cry for a few minutes, but she went on again pretty soon, and after a long, long while she found herself in a part of the woods where she had never been before.

She came to a place where there was a great bank of bright green moss under the trees. It was higher in the middle, something like a roof, and it was very soft and cool-looking, and Merrimeg was very tired.

She threw herself down on the bed of moss.

"How soft it is!" she said to herself.

As she said this, she sank down deep into the moss. Down she sank, deeper and deeper. She was frightened, and tried to jump up; but it was too late. The moss closed all over her, and she sank out of sight. She was *gone.*

Where do you think she was? She was in a little house under the ground. The moss was the roof of the house, and she fell right down

"BLESS MY SOUL!" SAID ONE OF THE GNOMES

through it into a little kitchen, where two gnomes were sitting at a table eating their dinner. She sat down plump on the floor, and stared at the gnomes.

"Bless my soul!" said one of the gnomes.

"Bless my soul too, brother!" said the other gnome.

"I'll tell you what it is, brother Nibby," said the first gnome, "the roof's broken in again."

"I believe you're right, brother Malkin, I believe you're right," said the other gnome.

"What'll we do with her?" said the gnome called Malkin.

"Whatever you say, brother," said the gnome called Nibby. "You always know best."

"She's all black," said the first gnome.

"So she is, brother, so she is," said the other gnome.

"But not quite all black," said the first gnome.

"No, not quite," said the other one. "How clever you are, brother Malkin."

"I see a white place behind her ear," said brother Malkin.

"There's a white place behind her ear, sure enough," said brother Nibby. "I wouldn't have noticed it myself."

"Then why isn't she white all over?" said brother Malkin.

"Ah! that's the point!" said brother Nibby. "Why isn't she?"

"Because she's never been thrown onto the Great Snow Mountain," said Malkin.

"That's it, that's it, just what I was going to say," said Nibby.

"Then we'd better throw her onto the Great Snow Mountain," said Malkin.

"That's a very clever idea, brother," said Nibby. "I don't know why I didn't think of it myself."

"But suppose she doesn't want to be white?" said Malkin.

"That's so," said the other. "I never thought of that."

"How will we find out?" said brother Malkin.

"That's the trouble," said Nibby. "How are we ever going to find out?"

"How would it do to ask her?" said Malkin.

"That's a very good idea," said brother Nibby. "How you do think of things!"

"Which one of us had better ask her?" said Malkin.

"Oh, that should be you, brother," said Nibby.

"I think you should be the one," said Malkin.

"Oh, no indeed, brother Malkin, no, no, no, no, no,——"

"I'll tell you!" cried Merrimeg, jumping to her feet, out of all patience with these gnomes. "I *do* want to be white! I do! I do!"

"I believe she wants to be white," said brother Malkin.

"I'm pretty sure of it," said Nibby.

"Then you'd better tell her to come along with us," said Malkin.

"Oh dear no, brother, I think *you* should be the one to tell her," said brother Nibby.

"No, you should be the one," said Malkin.

"No, you, brother Malkin."

"No, no; *you,* brother Nibby."

"Goodness gracious me!" cried Merrimeg,

more and more out of patience. "For mercy's sake come along! Don't let's stay here talking all day! Let's hurry, hurry!"

"She's not very polite, brother," said Malkin.

"Not very, indeed," said Nibby. "I noticed it myself."

Each of the gnomes took a lighted candle from the table; then they opened a door in the floor of the kitchen and went down a ladder, and Merrimeg went down after them.

When they were at the bottom, in a dark tunnel, lit only by the candles carried by the gnomes, Malkin stopped and said:

"We mustn't forget to have that roof fixed."

"No, we mustn't forget that," said Nibby.

"Oh, bother the roof," said Merrimeg to herself. "I wish we would get on."

"Did you hear what she said?" said Malkin. "It sounded to me like something rude."

"That's the way it sounded to me, too," said Nibby.

"I think we ought to ask her if she's rude or not," said Malkin.

"Yes, we ought to know that," said Nibby.

"Because if she is, we oughtn't to be out alone in the dark with her," said Malkin.

"No," said Nibby, "it wouldn't be safe."

"Then suppose you ask her if she's rude," said Malkin.

"*You're* the one to ask her, brother," said Nibby.

"Oh, dear me!" said Merrimeg. "You don't need to ask me. I'm *not* rude. Only sometimes maybe I am, but I don't mean it, and I wish you'd please hurry."

"I guess it's all right, brother Nibby," said Malkin.

They came to a stream of water, flowing along underground in the dark, and a little boat was tied to a stake in the stream. Merrimeg sat down at the back end of the boat, and the two gnomes sat down before her, each one with a paddle in his hand. The paddles began to dip in the water, and the little boat began to go swiftly up the stream.

"A little faster, brother," said Malkin.

"Very good, brother, very good," said Nibby.

With that, they began to paddle so fast that Merrimeg positively could not see their paddles, and the candles went out, and then she could not see anything at all. She felt that she was rushing along like lightning, and she had to hold on to the sides of the boat.

"It's getting colder now," said Malkin.

"So it is, brother, so it is," said Nibby.

Merrimeg was so cold by this time that her teeth chattered.

"We ought to have asked her if she'd mind being cold," said Malkin. "We forgot to ask her that."

"Yes, we forgot to ask her that," said Nibby. "But it's too late now."

Merrimeg's legs and arms were nearly frozen. They were so stiff that she could not move them. She thought that she was freezing to death.

"We're going up now," said Malkin.

"We are, sure enough, brother," said Nibby.

"Now for a good push up over the waterfall, and we'll be there," said Malkin.

IN FRONT OF THEM ROSE A GREAT MOUNTAIN OF SNOW. . . .

"Yes, now for a good push," said Nibby.

They were going up and up, and Merrimeg was getting stiffer and stiffer. She couldn't move at all by this time.

A great roar of falling water came to her from just ahead, and "Now!" cried Malkin, and "All right!" cried Nibby, and the boat turned straight up and climbed the side of the waterfall like an arrow, with the gnomes paddling for dear life.

"Here we are!" cried Malkin, and "Here we are, brother!" cried Nibby, and they came out of the side of the earth and paddled on quietly up the stream through a wide field of ice under a dark cloudy sky.

In front of them rose the top of a great mountain of snow.

"I don't believe she can move," said Malkin.

"I'm pretty sure she can't," said Nibby.

The boat stopped, and the gnomes got out on the ice and lifted out Merrimeg between them. She could hear and see, but she was frozen so stiff that she could not move.

"Do you think we can throw that far?" said Malkin.

"You're so strong, brother, you're so strong," said Nibby.

"Then let's try it," said Malkin.

They looked over at the top of the Great Snow Mountain, and picked Merrimeg up and swung her back and forth several times. Then Malkin cried "Now!" and they gave her a mighty toss and fling and away she flew through the air towards the mountain of snow; and she lit on the very top of it, and sank down and down in the soft snow until she was out of sight.

"We mustn't forget to fix the roof," said Malkin. "We'd better put some boards under the moss."

"I suppose so, brother; you always know best," said Nibby.

"Then let's go home and attend to it," said Malkin.

Up on the mountain top, Merrimeg sank down deeper and deeper into the soft snow. It seemed to her that she was falling for hours, and that she

would never come to the bottom; but at last she broke through the bottom of the snow, and underneath was a dark river, and in it were floating blocks of thick ice, and Merrimeg dropped right onto one of these blocks of ice as it was going along under her, and it carried her away down the dark stream, with a roof of snow over her head. Then she grew so dizzy that she really didn't know anything for a long time.

When she came to herself, she was floating along quietly on her block of ice through the woods, and the sun was shining and the birds were singing; and the ice had melted away so much that it would scarcely hold her. It was only a thin film under her, and she was getting wetter and wetter; and in another moment the ice struck a stone in the bottom and broke, and she was standing in the water up to her knees.

The water was cool and pleasant, and she was surprised to find that she wasn't cold any longer, and that she could move as well as ever. She waded to the shore and walked on into the woods;

and she had not walked very far when she saw a bright green patch of moss under the trees. She knew that it was the roof of the gnomes' house, and she wanted to see them again, for she was afraid she hadn't been very polite to them, and she knew she ought to thank them. She threw herself down on the bed of moss, but it wouldn't give way under her. The gnomes must have put something strong underneath to hold it up. Anyway, she couldn't break through.

She knew where she was now, and it didn't take her long to reach the pool where she had tried to wash the black off her face. She stooped down over the pool and looked at herself in the clear water.

She was fair as a lily, and her cheeks were red as roses.

She jumped up singing and ran towards the village where she lived.

As she skipped down the village street, she was singing over and over again, "The mountain has made me white again! The mountain has made me white again!" And all the children playing

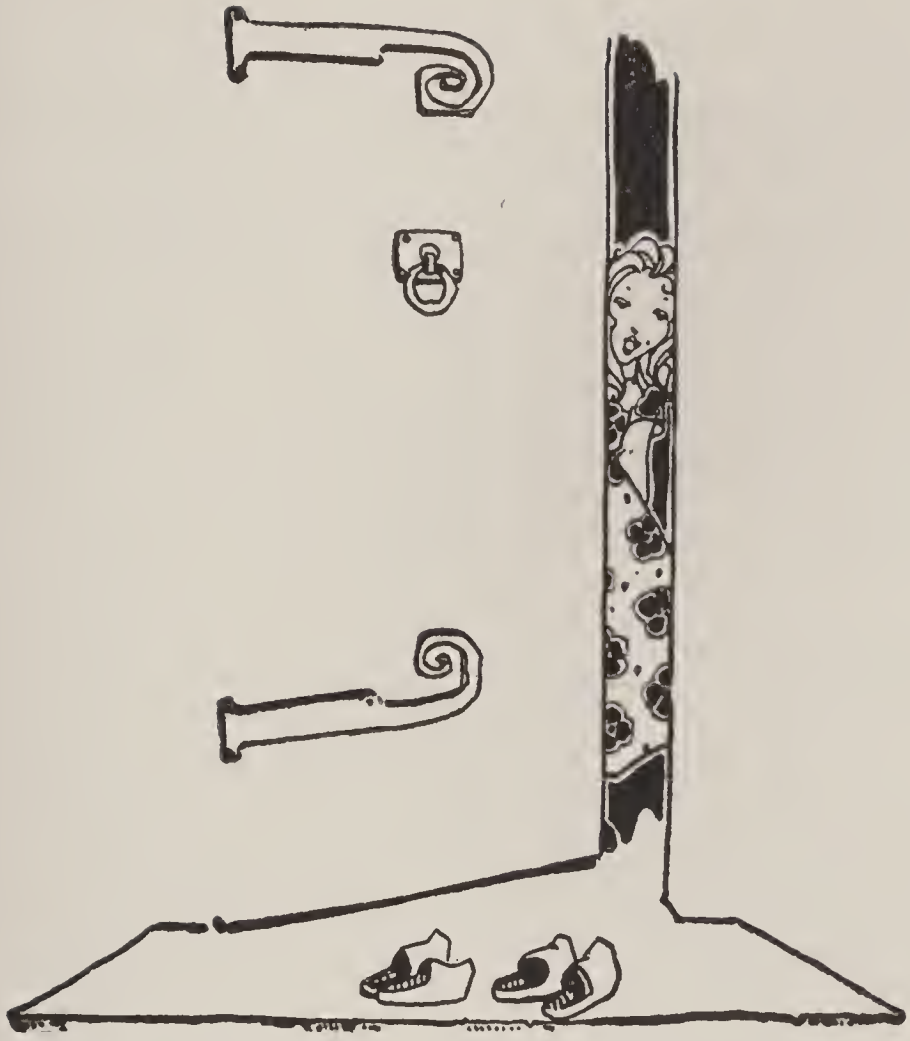
in the street stopped to stare at her, wondering what she meant, and some of them called after her, "Merrimeg! Merrimeg!" But she paid no attention. She ran home, skipping and dancing, and hurried through the cabbage garden and in at the kitchen door. Her little broom was lying on the floor where she had left it. At the back of the fireplace was the pile of dust, exactly where she had swept it. She thought it was queer that the wind which had drawn her up the chimney hadn't blown away the dust; but there it was. Probably those chimney imps wanted to leave it where her mother would be sure to see it.

She snatched up the broom and swept the dust into the dustpan, and you can believe that she didn't put her head into the fireplace, either; she reached in and swept the dust out into the dustpan and carried it out to the cabbage garden and emptied it. And as she came back into the kitchen her mother came in from the front room and said,——

"Oh, here you are. Where have you been so

long? While you were out there was a funny little black girl who came to the door and said she was Merrimeg!"

"Yes'm," said Merrimeg.



MERRIMEG AND THE CLOP-CLOP SHOES

MERRIMEG AND THE CLOP-CLOP SHOES

IT was Sunday morning, and Merrimeg was always good on Sunday.

Everybody was in church,—everybody but Merrimeg. Her mother had let her stay at home as a reward, because she had done her sweeping so neatly.

The house was empty, and there was not a soul in the village street.

Merrimeg was sitting at the front window, looking at pictures in a book and telling herself stories about them. Sometimes she would gaze out of the open window at the sunshine.

After a while she stopped talking to herself, and looked up and listened. She was sure that she heard a sound in the street. It was a kind of clop-clop! and it seemed to be coming nearer. She peeped around the corner of the window and looked out.

Two pairs of wooden shoes, quite small, were coming down the street side by side, towards her house. Each pair of wooden shoes was walking along in the usual way, but the astonishing thing was that there were no feet in them. There was nobody at all in them. They were walking along all by themselves.

Merrimeg opened her eyes wide. She had never seen such a sight as that before. Clop-clop! went the wooden shoes on the hard ground, just as if two people were stepping down the street. But no, there was nothing anywhere in the street but those two pairs of shoes, coming along clop-clop!

Merrimeg held her breath and watched to see the shoes go by her window. Clop-clop! they came, sounding plainer and plainer; clop-clop! right up to the door of her house; and when they came to the door, there they stopped.

Merrimeg drew her head back a little, getting ready to run if she had to, but she watched them with both eyes.

"I think this is a house," said a voice.

"I believe it is, brother, I believe it is," said another voice.

Merrimeg looked all around, but she could see nobody. The voices seemed to be coming from the spot where the shoes were standing.

"What if she should be cross to-day?" said the first voice.

"Then she wouldn't help us, brother," said the other voice, "and what on earth *would* we do then?"

"But it's Sunday," said the first voice, "and they aren't cross on Sunday, hardly ever."

"That's so, brother, that's so," said the other voice. "You do think of everything."

"How would it do to knock?" said the first voice.

"I was just thinking about that myself," said the other voice.

Merrimeg was listening with both ears, and she heard, as plain as could be, three knocks on the front door; but what it was that was knocking at the door, she couldn't see. All that she could see was that two pairs of wooden

shoes moved up onto the doorstep, and stood there.

While she was wondering about it the knock sounded again, and without stopping to think any more she jumped up and ran to the door and opened it, not very wide, and looked down at the shoes.

"It's herself, brother Nibby," said a voice in the doorway.

"So it is, brother Malkin, so it is," said the other voice.

"Why, it's the two gnomes!" cried Merrimeg. "But where are you?"

"She can't see us, of course," said the first voice.

"No, of course not," said the second voice. "I forgot that."

"If you're there," said Merrimeg, "come in!" and she opened the door wide.

The two pairs of shoes stepped into the room, and stood with their toes towards Merrimeg.

"Do you suppose she'll be willing to help us?" said the voice of Malkin the gnome.

"Just what I'm wondering, brother," said the voice of Nibby.

"Of course I'll help you!" said Merrimeg. "What's the matter?"

"She's pretty good to-day," said Malkin's voice.

"I can see that, brother," said Nibby's voice.

"I can't see anything at all!" cried Merrimeg. "Where *are* you, anyway? Are you *here,* or where?"

"Of course she doesn't know what the witch has done to us," said the voice of Malkin.

"No, she doesn't know that the witch has taken away our bodies," said the voice of Nibby.

"And we want to get them back," said Malkin's voice.

"And we want her to help us," said Nibby's voice.

"It's a frightful nuisance being without a body," said Malkin's voice.

"She ought to know that without being told, I should think," said Nibby's voice.

"How can I help you?" said Merrimeg. "I'll do anything I can."

"She isn't cross at all to-day," said Malkin's voice.

"No, it's Sunday," said Nibby's voice.

"She'd better come along with us at once, then," said Malkin's voice.

"Yes," said Nibby's voice, "they'll throw our bodies down the well if we don't hurry."

"Suppose you tell her, then."

"Oh, no, brother, *you're* the one to tell her."

"Oh dear no, brother Nibby, *you* are the one to——"

"I'll come!" said Merrimeg. "Never mind telling me. Go ahead, and I'll follow you!"

The two pairs of wooden shoes turned and went out of the open door, and Merrimeg followed them as they went clop-clopping down the street.

They left the village and went into the woods. They found a path which Merrimeg had never seen before, and they walked along this path, under the trees and bushes, and across little

THE CLOP-CLOP SHOES WENT ON INTO THE WOODS.

streams, for a long, long time; and the woods grew thicker and thicker, so that at last they could not see the sun, and it was very dark; and all the while the two pairs of little shoes went on before, and Merrimeg followed behind.

"I suppose we'd better tell her the right word now," said the voice of Malkin, "before we meet old Verbum Sap."

"Yes, before we meet old Sappy," said Nibby's voice.

"Dear me!" said Malkin's voice. "Blest if I haven't forgotten the word myself!"

"Oh, mercy on us, whatever will we do now?" said Nibby's voice.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" said Malkin's voice. "If I could only remember the word! Isn't it something like *cat-tails?*"

"No, no, brother, nothing like that!"

"Can't *you* remember the word, brother Nibby?"

"Oh, *me?* Oh dear yes, brother, *I* know what the word is. But *you've* forgotten it, brother Malkin! Whatever shall we do now? We'll

never get our bodies back without the word, never, never!''

''But don't *you* know what it is, brother Nibby?''

''Oh yes, brother Malkin, but what good will that do, if *you* don't know what it is?''

''That's so, that's so. I never thought of that. Oh dear me, I'm sure I don't know what we're going to do about it.''

Merrimeg very nearly lost all patience at this.

''Why don't you *tell* him what it is, then?'' she said.

''I do hope she isn't going to be cross,'' said Malkin's voice. ''But anyway, that's a pretty good idea. Suppose you *tell* me what the word is? Isn't it something like *cat-tails?*''

''Nothing like that, brother, nothing like that!''

''What *is* it, then?''

''It's *kitten-tails!*''

''Then we'd better tell her now, before old Sappy comes up, so she'll know the word.''

"Which one of us had better tell her?"

"I think *you* should be the one to tell her, brother Nibby——"

"Oh bother!" said Merrimeg. "I *know* what the word is now. It's kitten-tails."

"She's getting cross, she's getting cross, brother Nibby," said Malkin's voice. "Do you think we'd better go back?"

"I'm not cross," said Merrimeg. "Please excuse me. I won't speak so any more."

"I believe it's all right, brother Nibby," said Malkin's voice. "Now you'd better tell her about the word. Whatever they say to her, she must use that word, and she mustn't use any other; tell her that, brother Nibby. She mustn't say anything else to them, because if she does they'll take her body away from her too, and we'll never get our bodies back; tell her that, brother Nibby. And we mustn't speak at all, because that would spoil everything. And whatever she does, she mustn't let them take her shoes off. Tell her, brother."

"Excuse me," said Merrimeg, very politely.

"I heard what you said, so he needn't tell me, if you please."

"Now that's what I call very clever of her," said Malkin's voice.

"Very, very," said Nibby's voice.

In a few minutes they came to a place where the vines and brambles hung down so low over the path that Merrimeg had to crawl on her hands and knees; and just then Malkin said, in a very low voice:

"There's old Sappy."

Right in the middle of the path before them stood a great gray owl, staring at them with his big round eyes. The shoes stopped still, and Merrimeg sat up on her heels. The owl seemed to be staring straight at her. He opened his beak, and a hoarse voice came out of his mouth, sounding as if he had a bad cold, and the voice said:

"What do you want here, child?"

"Kitten-tails," said Merrimeg, remembering that she wasn't on any account to say anything else.

The owl ruffled his feathers and winked one of his eyes, very slowly. He stared at Merrimeg for a moment, then he turned around and walked off down the path before them. The wooden shoes stepped along after him, and Merrimeg followed on her hands and knees.

Old Sappy, if that was his name, led them a long way under the vines and brambles, and stopped at the end of the path before a green wall of leaves, very tall, made of vines matted thick together. At the bottom of this leafy wall was a little opening, and after looking behind him for a moment old Sappy went in, and after him stepped the two pairs of shoes, and last of all in crawled Merrimeg.

When she was inside, she stood up. She was standing on a floor which looked like green marble, very hard and shiny, and as she moved her feet on it her shoes began to pinch her feet painfully. All around her, in a circle, was the high wall of green leaves, and overhead the branches of the trees hung down, making a green roof.

On one of these branches was perched a great black ugly bird, very like a buzzard. Its little sharp eyes were looking hard at Merrimeg.

Around the walls, on the ground, was a row of gray owls,—dozens of them, all staring at Merrimeg with their big round eyes.

In the middle of the floor was a dark opening, like the mouth of a well; and alongside of it were lying the bodies of the two gnomes, on their backs, with their eyes closed. They had no shoes on their feet. The two pairs of wooden shoes walked across the floor and stood beside the bodies.

Old Sappy stopped beside the well and looked up at the ugly black bird over his head, and ruffled his feathers as if he were shivering.

The bird overhead perked its head down sidewise, and gave a croak and said:

"It's nearly time!"

"Time for what? Time for what?" croaked all the owls together.

"Time to put the bodies in the well!" said the ugly bird.

AROUND THE WALLS WAS A ROW
OF GRAY OWLS

"What shall we do first?" said the owls together.

"Get me another body for the well!" said the bird overhead.

"There are only two bodies!" sang out the owls.

"I see another, I see another!" said the bird on the branch.

Then the bird in the tree began to croak and grumble to itself, and old Sappy stared at Merrimeg and said:

"What must she do?"

"She must come to the well!" said all the owls together.

"How must she come?"

"She must walk! She must walk!"

"Who'll take off her shoes?" said old Sappy.

"We will, we will!" cried all the owls together, and they all ran towards her, opening their beaks and squawking as they crowded in around her feet.

But Merrimeg kicked out right and left and scattered them in every direction. She found

herself standing before the well and the ugly black bird overhead gave an angry screech.

"What shall we do with her?" said old Sappy.

"The riddle! The riddle!" screamed the ugly black bird overhead.

"The riddle! The riddle!" sang out all the owls together.

"Answer the riddle!" said old Sappy. But as he said it he gave a slow wink with his right eye. "Answer the riddle, and answer it right! Or else,—or else,—off come your shoes, off come your shoes!"

"What is the riddle?" cried all the owls.

"This is the riddle, and answer it right," said old Sappy. "What is it that has no feet and runs away on four feet and is chased by the same four feet, and lives on food and drink and never eats nor drinks?"

"What is it? What is it?" croaked all the owls.

"Kitten-tails!" said Merrimeg, sobbing with fright as she said it.

The black bird overhead gave a piercing scream, spread its wings, and tried to fly away. But before it could fly, while it was flapping and struggling, a change came over it, and in its place was a horrible little old woman, hanging on to the branch and kicking and screaming, and trying to keep from falling down out of the tree. She was much heavier than the bird had been, and the branch was not strong enough to bear her; it snapped in half under her, and down she fell, still kicking, directly into the opening of the well. She was gone.

Merrimeg heard a splash far down in the well, and at the same time the green walls disappeared, and the well-opening was covered over, and the green marble floor turned into soft green moss, raised in the middle like a roof, and the owls flew away among the trees.

Merrimeg looked down at the bodies of the two gnomes, lying on the bright green moss. One of them opened his eyes and yawned and stretched his arms; and the other yawned and stretched his arms and opened his eyes; and they

both got up together, and looked down at their feet.

"I suppose we'd better put on our shoes," said one of them.

"I suppose we had, brother," said the other one.

They put on their wooden shoes quickly, and then they noticed Merrimeg.

"Oh, yes," said one of the gnomes, "I remember everything now. Brother Nibby, we ought to thank her for helping us get our bodies back."

"That we ought, brother, that we ought, indeed," said Nibby.

"Which one of us should tell her?" said Malkin.

"I think you could do it much better," said Nibby. "You're always so clever."

"Please don't bother about thanking me," said Merrimeg. "I'm so glad I could help you."

"Really, she isn't rude at all to-day," said Malkin.

"Not a bit, brother Malkin, not a bit," said Nibby.

"Then we'd better go home," said Malkin. "Why, bless me, we're home right now! This is the roof of our own house!"

"Now it's queer I didn't notice that before," said Nibby. "How you do notice everything, brother!"

"Good-by," said Merrimeg. "I must get home before mother comes back from church. Good-by."

"Brother Nibby," said Malkin, "will you ask her to stay and have dinner with us in our own house?"

"I'm sorry," said Merrimeg, "but I can't stay now. Thank you ever so much. I must hurry home. Good-by."

She didn't wait for an answer. Away she ran, and it wasn't very long before she was in the

village street again. In a few minutes she was sitting quietly at the front window of her house with the picture book on her knee, and there she was sitting when her mother came home from church.

"That's what I call a good little girl," said her mother, "—sitting there quietly with your book, just as I left you."

"Yes'm," said Merrimeg.

MERRIMEG AND THE STARLIGHT FAIRIES

MERRIMEG AND THE STARLIGHT FAIRIES

MERRIMEG was asleep in her little bed, and Merrimeg's mother was asleep in her big bed.

It was late at night, and everybody in the village was asleep. All the houses were dark, and the stars were shining overhead.

Merrimeg woke up, and listened. She thought she heard a sound as if someone were crying.

She got up out of bed in her white nightgown, and tiptoed over to her mother and looked at her. Her mother was fast asleep, but she still heard the sound of crying.

She decided that it must be outside in the street, so she opened the front door and peeped out.

In the street before the door were three beautiful children, and one of them was crying.

They were all of about the same size as Merrimeg, and they were dressed in long dark blue gowns, fine as spider webs, which rippled around them in the cool air. They were barefoot and bareheaded. Each one had long black hair streaming down to her waist, and a pair of great wide wings standing out straight from her shoulders, like the wings of an enormous butterfly, all blue and silver.

One of the children had her arms about the one who was crying. They all looked up at Merrimeg as she opened the door.

"You're Merrimeg, aren't you?" said the one who had her arms about the other.

Merrimeg stepped out into the street under the stars.

"Yes," said she. "What is she crying about? Are you lost?"

"You'd—better—tell her—who we are, Pennie," said the one who had been crying, choking back her sobs.

"We aren't lost," said the one who hadn't yet spoken. "We're looking for our star."

"We've lost it," said the one who had been crying, breaking out into sobs again.

"Don't cry, Winnie," said the one who had her arms about her. "She'll help us find it, I know she will."

"Why is she crying?" said Merrimeg again.

"She's Winnie, and I'm Florrie," said the one who had just spoken, "and this one's Pennie. Don't you know who we are?"

"No," said Merrimeg.

"We're the starlight fairies," said Florrie. "*Now* do you know?"

"No," said Merrimeg.

"I thought everybody knew," said Florrie. "Every evening at dark we fly along the sky up there and hang out the stars. Haven't you ever seen us?"

"No," said Merrimeg.

"I suppose they can't see us from down here, and we've never been away from the stars before."

"I wish we'd never come," said Winnie, crying again.

"I'll tell you," said Pennie. "To-night we were hanging out the stars, and Winnie—poor Winnie!"

"I didn't mean to," sobbed Winnie. "I didn't mean to!"

"What did she do?" said Merrimeg.

"She dropped one of her stars," said Pennie.

"It's gone!" sobbed Winnie. "And I can't go back without it!"

"It fell and fell and fell and fell," said Florrie, "and then we couldn't see it any more. It dropped down here, somewhere near here, we're sure of it."

"Do you see up there?" said Pennie. "Up there where there's a wide dark space between the stars?" She pointed to the sky, directly overhead. There was a space there, about as big as a blanket, without any star.

"Yes, I see," said Merrimeg.

"That's where the star belongs," said Pennie.

"We'll never find it!" said Winnie, putting her face down on Florrie's shoulder.

"I'm sure we shall," said Florrie, "if Merri-

meg will only help us. We don't know anything about this dreadful earth place, but she knows."

"Will you help us?" said Pennie.

"If I can," said Merrimeg.

"Then come along," said Pennie.

"Can't I put on my clothes first?" said Merrimeg.

"There's no time," said Pennie. "Suppose daylight should come before we find it? What *would* we do?"

"Let's go, then," said Florrie; and she moved away lightly down the street, drawing Winnie along by the hand, their wings waving gently in the air.

"Where shall we go?" said Pennie.

A thought came into Merrimeg's mind. She would take them to the gnomes' house, and the two brothers would surely tell them how to find the star.

"I'll take you," said she, pushing on ahead towards the woods beyond the village. She was used to going barefoot, and she didn't mind the

rough ground. It was a warm night, and she soon forgot that she was only in her nightgown.

They went into the woods.

"It's so gloomy," said Winnie, in a whisper. "I don't like these strange earth places. I wish we were at home among the stars."

"We'll be home before morning, never fear," said Florrie.

They stopped beside the pool where Merrimeg had once tried to wash the black from her face. The trees were wide apart here, and Merrimeg, looking up, could see the bare spot in the sky directly overhead, where the lost star belonged.

"Where are you taking us?" said Pennie.

"I'm taking you to the gnomes' house," said Merrimeg. "We'll soon be there. It's two gnomes who've been very good to me; I know where they live. They're the ones to help us."

"Is one of them named Malkin?" said Florrie.

"And the other one Nibby?" said Pennie.

"Yes," said Merrimeg.

"LOOK!" SHE CRIED

"Then it's no use," said Pennie. "We've been there already."

"They were asleep," said Florrie, "and we woke them up, and they didn't like it a bit. They wouldn't get up for any foolish old star,—that's what they said. But they told us about you, and that's how we came to hunt you up. But the horrid gnomes wouldn't do a thing for us; they wouldn't even get up."

"They're not horrid," said Merrimeg. "Oh dear, I don't know what we're going to do now."

She looked down sadly into the dark water of the pool, trying to think what to do next. She gave a little jump of surprise, and looked harder. Far, far down, away down deep under the water of the pool,——

She saw a star.

"Look!" she cried, and pointed her finger at it.

The starlight fairies leaned over, and looked down into the pool.

"That's it!" cried Florrie.

"It's my star!" cried Winnie.

"It's our lost star!" cried Pennie. "Dropped down from the sky to the bottom of this pool."

"Then," said Merrimeg, "you'd better go down and get it."

"Oh no! oh no! oh no!" cried the three fairies together.

"We mustn't get our wings wet!" said Pennie.

"We'd never be able to fly home if our wings got wet," said Winnie.

"But *you* have no wings," said Florrie to Merrimeg.

"No, *she* has no wings," said Pennie.

"*She* shall go down for our star," said Winnie. "You will, won't you?"

"The water's deep and dark," said Merrimeg.

"But you have no wings," said Florrie.

"The water's cold and gloomy," said Merrimeg.

"But you have no wings," said Pennie.

"I wonder if I could do it," said Merrimeg.

"Oh please!" cried Winnie. "Oh dearest Merrimeg, please get my star."

"I'll see how deep it is," said Merrimeg, and she threw a stone into the middle of the pool. The water rippled away as the stone sank, and the star could not be seen any longer.

"Oh!" cried Winnie. "Now you've sent my star away! It's gone!"

But the water became quiet in a moment, and there was the star again, shining bright at the bottom of the pool.

At that instant, they heard a splash in the water, and a shrill voice, like the voice of an angry boy, cried out:

"Who breaks my glass? Who breaks my glass?"

"What can that be?" whispered Merrimeg.

"I don't know," said Florrie. "Throw another stone, and perhaps we'll hear it again."

Merrimeg tossed another stone into the pool, and when the ripples had died away they heard the same voice again. This time it said:

"Who strikes my children? Who strikes my children?"

"Throw another," whispered Pennie, and Merrimeg cast in another stone.

This time there was a loud wail, and the voice cried:

"My children! My children! I'm coming! I'm coming!"

Then there was a splash, and nothing more. They waited a long time, but they heard nothing more.

"I'm going to see," said Merrimeg. "I may have hurt somebody. I can see better from the end of that log."

There was a dead log, the trunk of a fallen tree, lying out from the bank of the pool into the water, and Merrimeg stepped onto it and getting down on her hands and knees crawled out to the end of it. It was slippery, and she had to hold on very carefully to keep from falling off into the water.

She leaned over as far as she could and looked down into the pool. She looked everywhere for

the star, but she couldn't see it; there seemed to be some dark thing under the water between herself and the star.

"The star is gone!" she said to the others, in a whisper.

As she said this, a hand came up out of the water and seized her wrist and pulled her off the log. Over she went into the pool, down, down, far down. The hand never once let go of her wrist. It pulled her down and down, faster and faster. At first she thought she was going to choke with the water, but in a moment she was all right again, only wet, very wet. And in another moment she was at the bottom, and the hand let go of her wrist. She stood up on her two feet on a floor of what looked like glass.

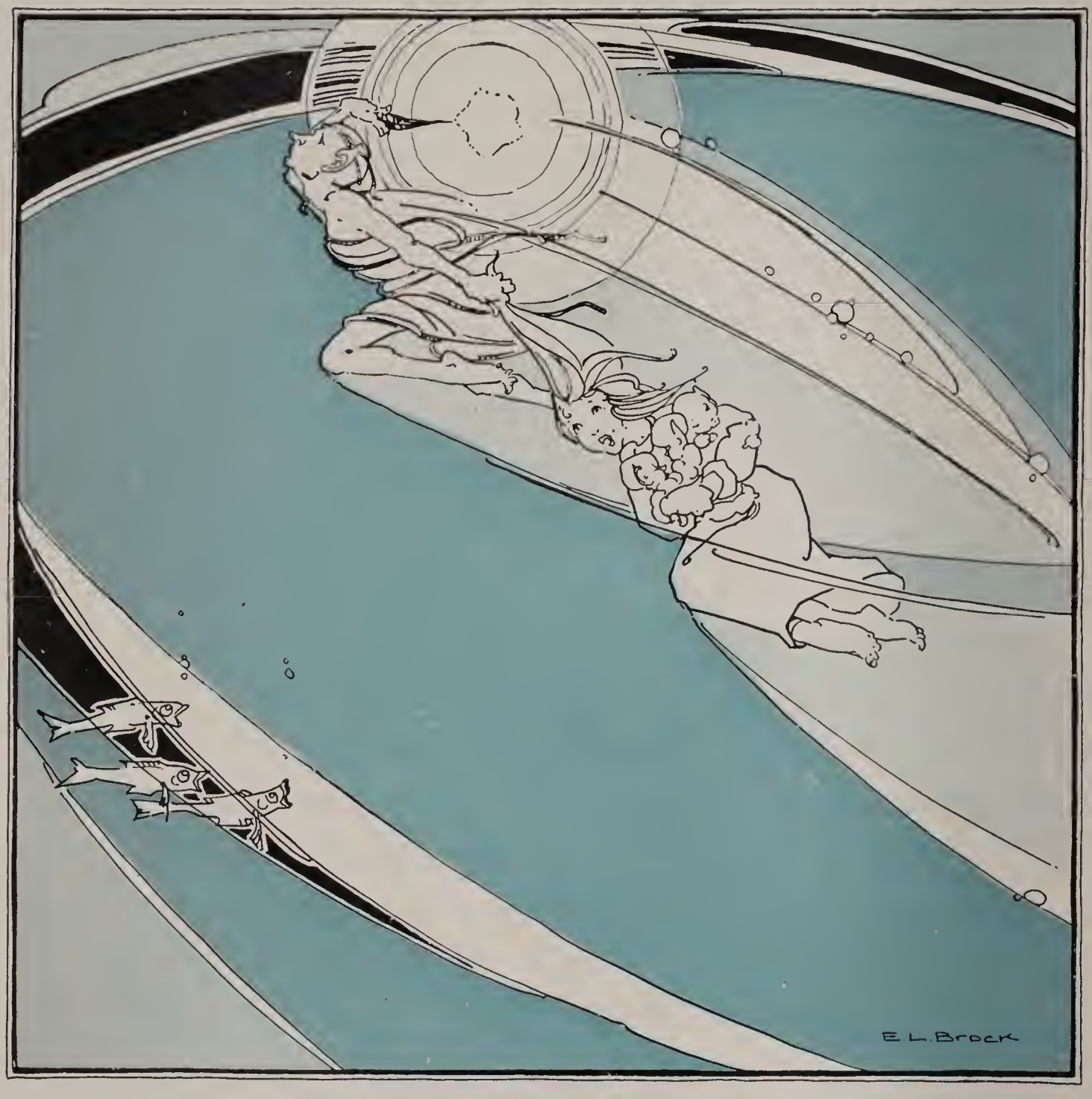
There was a pale light shining all about her through the water, and she saw that it came from the star, lying on the floor nearby. Just over her head was a roof of glass, and it was badly broken in three or four places. Around her were walls of glass. She was in a little house of glass, with a broken roof, and full of water.

A hand took hold suddenly of her arm, and she was dragged across the floor in a great hurry, by the creature who had pulled her down from the log. It was a sprite; a water sprite, whose head just reached to her shoulder; full-grown, evidently, in spite of being so small; with pointed ears, and no hair on his head, and long green water grass trailing around him.

He dragged Merrimeg straight to the star, and picked it up by a kind of sling that it was meant to hang by. It flashed and glittered as he snatched it up.

He pointed to the floor, and Merrimeg saw, lying there side by side, three tiny sprites, babies, no bigger than kittens, and exactly like the grown one who was holding her arm. They looked as if they were asleep, but on the forehead of each one was a black and blue bruise, and Merrimeg knew that she must have hurt them with her stones, as well as broken the glass of their little home.

Their father, if it was their father, motioned to her to pick them up. She gathered them up



UPWARD THROUGH THE WATER . . .

in her arms, and the sprite, carrying the star in one hand, seized her hair with the other hand and sprang up towards the holes in the broken glass roof; and in another instant she was being dragged upward through the water as fast as she had been pulled down.

She almost dropped the little mites she was holding in her arms, but she hugged them tighter, and when they came to the surface of the pool she was holding them safe in her arms.

They came out dripping on the bank of the pool, and there were the three starlight fairies.

"Oh!" cried Winnie. "She's brought my star!"

The water sprite dragged Merrimeg onto the dry grass, and took the three babies from her arms and laid them down on the grass.

"Now! now! now!" he cried. It was plain that he was very angry. He was trembling all over. "What are you going to do about it? Look what you've done."

"Why," said Merrimeg, "why——"

"First comes this horrible star and breaks in the roof of my house and lets in all the water! And then—oh you wicked creatures!—you throw down your 'bom'nable stones and break my roof all to pieces and kill my children—my poor children—*look* at 'em—*look* at 'em, will you?—look at those bumps on their foreheads—oh my poor children—You 'bom'nable creatures, you! You perfectly awful wicked 'bom'nable——"

"Oh!" said Florrie. "It's too bad. I'm so sorry."

"We didn't mean to do any harm," said Pennie.

"And after he was so kind as to bring our star back to us, too," said Winnie.

"Is this your star?" cried out the water sprite.

"Yes, yes! It's mine!" said Winnie.

"Then you'll never get it! You shan't have it!" cried the water sprite, angrier than ever. "You'll see what I'm going to do with it! You'll never get it again! Ah! there she goes!"

He swung the star by the sling in his hand,

and gave it a great fling, and away it flew over the tree tops, in a beautiful bright curve, higher and higher, and then lower and lower.

But he was greatly mistaken if he thought he could get rid of the star in any such way as that. Quick as a flash all three of the starlight fairies were in the air, and off like three arrows over the tree tops after the star. Before Merrimeg knew what was happening they were out of sight, and the star was gone.

The water sprite was so astonished that he forgot he was angry.

"Who are they?" he said, in a kind of whisper.

"They're the starlight fairies," said Merrimeg. "They hang out the stars each night, and to-night they dropped that star by accident, and it fell into your pool. If they don't get it back they can't go home."

"But they killed my children and——"

At that moment the lost star appeared over the tree tops, coming on towards them in a streak of white light, and in another moment the three

starlight fairies stood on the ground, and Winnie was swinging the star in her hand.

"Oh! oh!" she said, and began to laugh and cry at the same time. She couldn't say another word, for joy.

"We've got it!" cried Florrie. "We can go home now!"

"But what about these poor babies?" said Merrimeg. "Can't we do anything for them?"

The three fairies knelt around the three tiny bodies on the ground, and looked closely at their foreheads.

"Why," said Pennie, "it's nothing but a bruise!"

"So it is," said Winnie and Florrie together.

"Is that all?" said Merrimeg.

"Is that *all?*" said the water sprite, looking very helpless and pitiful.

"Yaa! yaa!" came a little piping cry from the grass, and the water sprite dropped to the ground beside the babies.

"He's crying!" sang out the water sprite. "His eyes are open!"

Another little cry and another came from the grass, and the water sprite sang out again:

"They're *all* crying! They're *all* coming to! They're *all* right! Hurrah!"

He picked up the three babies and bundled them in his arms, and without another word gave

a leap into the water and splash! went down and out of sight, babies and all.

Florrie laughed, Winnie laughed, and Pennie and Merrimeg laughed too.

"But I'm sorry his house is ruined," said Merrimeg.

"Oh, he'll mend it in no time," said Florrie. "But see, Merrimeg, you're all wet!"

"Goodness!" said Merrimeg. "I'd forgotten all about it."

"Stand here," said Florrie, and she and the other two fairies placed Merrimeg in the middle and turned their backs to her.

Their wings began to flutter gently, and then began to move faster and faster, making a strong breeze which blew all over Merrimeg. Fanned in this way by the great butterfly wings, she was soon dry.

"Good-by, Merrimeg," said Florrie.

"Good-by, dear Merrimeg," said each of the others.

"Thank you for my star," said Winnie. "You must think of us whenever you look up at the stars."

"Indeed I will," said Merrimeg.

The starlight fairies stood on tiptoe for a moment, and fluttered their wings; and then they rose quietly in the air, and flew straight up. When they were above the tree tops, they began to circle round and round, going higher and higher; far, far up through the night they went

on circling; and long after Merrimeg could see them no more, she could see the star, bright as a diamond, go circling up and up. . . .

She ran away home, and crept in quietly at the front door, and lay down in her bed and snuggled under the covers. Her mother was still asleep. She must have gone to sleep herself presently; she woke up and thought of the lost star, and remembered that she had not waited to see if it was in its place. She got out of bed and tiptoed to the window, and putting her head out looked up.

A star was sparkling just overhead, where there had been none before. The star was in its place.

"I'm glad of that," she said out loud.

"What did you say?" said her mother, waking up.

"I was only saying—only saying——"

"Never mind what you were saying. Go back to bed, and go to sleep. You'll catch your death of cold."

"Yes, mother," said Merrimeg.

MERRIMEG AND THE ECHO DWARFS

MERRIMEG AND THE ECHO DWARFS

NOW, Merrimeg," said Merrimeg's mother, "take this basket and go to the brook in the woods, and bring me back a basketful of water cress for supper. And be sure to come straight back."

"Yes, mother," said Merrimeg. And she went off down the village street singing, with her basket on her arm. But first she put in her pocket the blue saltcellar from the kitchen, full of salt.

She walked a long way into the woods, and at last she came to a little brook running along over the stones. There in the clear water she found plenty of fresh green water cress growing. She pulled it up by the handful and filled her basket with it.

She knew that she ought to go straight home, but this was not one of her days for being good.

She left the basket on the grass, and took out of her pocket the saltcellar with the salt in it. Then she looked around for birds.

A blue bird came hopping by on the ground, and Merrimeg stole up behind it on tiptoe, and sprinkled a little salt right down over its tail. But just at that minute the bird flew up into a tree, and Merrimeg was too late.

Off went the bird from tree to tree, and Merrimeg ran after it as fast as she could, holding out her saltcellar. Pretty soon the bird hopped down onto the ground again, and Merrimeg tiptoed up behind it and sprinkled her salt down over its tail. But she was just a bit too late, and the bird flew up into a tree.

Merrimeg followed the bird a long, long way, and whenever it hopped down onto the ground she tried to sprinkle a little salt on its tail; but she was always just a wee bit too late.

At last, when she was at the foot of a hill that rose up out of the woods, she stamped her foot and cried out:

"Oh, you good-for-nothing naughty bird!"

"Naughty bird!" came back her own voice to her from the top of the hill.

Merrimeg was astonished. She had never heard an echo before.

She thought she would try it again, so she called out:

"Oh, you naughty bird, come down here!"

Her own voice came back to her from the same place up the hill, but it didn't quite repeat her words; it said:

"Come on down!"

The echo must have made a mistake. Merrimeg was more than ever astonished. She waited a minute, and then the same voice came down to her from the top of the hill, and it said:

"Down here!"

The echo had got it right this time. Evidently it must have been a very young echo indeed.

Merrimeg forgot all about the blue bird, and she began to climb the hill to find out who it was that was mocking her.

She didn't know it, but there was an Echo Dwarf who lived in a cave near the top of the

hill, and there lived with him his little boy, a very little boy, who was just learning how to make echoes. Big Hark was the father's name. Little Hark was the little boy's name. Big Hark had a great deal of trouble in teaching Little Hark to make echoes, for Little Hark often forgot, and instead of calling back the same words he had heard, he would often call back words of his own. Besides, if the words he had to call back were big words, he always got them mixed up. His father never knew when he was going to make a mess of everything. And when he did that, it made Big Hark so angry he could hardly speak.

Merrimeg went on up the hill, and pretty soon she called out again:

"Why couldn't I catch the bird with my salt?"

"Too slow!" came back the voice from the top of the hill.

Merrimeg couldn't understand this at all. She listened for a minute, and then she heard another voice up above her:

"OXTRAGOB BORGS, GOOBLIK!"

"My salt! Oxtragob borgs, gooblik!"

This was Little Hark's father, and when he said "Oxtragob borgs, gooblik!" he meant, in the private language of the Echo Dwarfs, "Wrong again, stupid!"

Big Hark and Little Hark were standing in front of their cave, and Big Hark was letting Little Hark practice at making echoes, as Merrimeg came up the hill. Not many people came that way, and Big Hark was glad of the chance to give his little boy a lesson.

Merrimeg came on further and further up the hill, and after a while she stopped and called out again:

"Are you still there?"

"Still there!" came back the voice.

This made her quite angry. She did not like to be mocked every time she opened her mouth. She cried out:

"Stop mocking me!"

"Mocking me!" came back the voice.

This made her very angry indeed. Without saying anything more she clambered on up the

hill and stopped all out of breath on a little ledge before the mouth of a cave. There a little further on along the path was standing Little Hark himself, with his hands up to his mouth, all ready to shout back an echo. His father had gone inside the cave.

Little Hark was very small indeed, and Merrimeg looked quite like a giant beside him. She ran to him and stood over him and shook her finger at him and said:

"What do you mean by mocking me all the time?"

"All the time?" said Little Hark, looking very much frightened.

"Yes, all the time!" said Merrimeg. "What do you mean by it?"

"Mean by it?" said the little Echo Dwarf.

"Don't you dare repeat everything I say to you!" cried Merrimeg. "You naughty thing, you're mocking me!"

"You're mocking me!" said Little Hark, beginning to cry.

"Why, you awful little thing, I'm not!" cried

"HOW DARE YOU SAY SUCH A THING? HOW DARE YOU?"

Merrimeg. "How dare you say such a thing? How dare you?"

"How dare you?" said Little Hark, crying harder.

This made Merrimeg very angry, so angry that she could not say another word. She seized hold of Little Hark's arm and shook him. There she was shaking him, pretty hard too, and Little Hark was bawling out loud, when Big Hark, his father, came out of the cave and hurried towards them to see what was the matter.

Big Hark was very strong, though he was not very big. He threw his arms around Merrimeg and dragged her away from Little Hark and hauled her along to the cave and pulled her into it. Before she knew it her arms were bound up tight with tough vines which Big Hark had snatched down from the wall.

Big Hark made her sit down on the floor with her back against the wall, and he and Little Hark stood before her. Little Hark looked at his father and said:

"Kormsdee lokspit calliper?"

This meant, in the private language of the Echo Dwarfs, "What are you going to do with her?"

"Lokspit meegs," said Big Hark, "doomdog askbiddle beddagog diskorfunjax krissmuss."

This meant, "I am going to keep her here for seven Christmases, for you to practice your echo lessons on."

"Snexterbean?" asked Little Hark. This meant, "What then?"

"Lokspit snexter," said Big Hark, "flambilly noformikin beskeem." This meant, as you may imagine, "I am then going to give her to the Fire Bubbles at the back of the cave."

Merrimeg tried to get her arms loose, and cried out:

"I want to go home! I want to go home!"

Big Hark nudged Little Hark, reminding him to practice his echo, and Little Hark said:

"Go home!"

"All right, then, I will!" cried Merrimeg, and she struggled to her feet and started to run to-

wards the mouth of the cave. But Big Hark caught her and held her, and she cried out:

"Let me go! Let me go!"

"Go!" said Little Hark, echoing her words, and Merrimeg cried:

"I can't! He won't let me!"

Now Little Hark should have said "Let me!"

But he forgot all about echoing her words, and he shouted out two words of his own.

"Run back!" he cried, and this was what gave Merrimeg her chance to escape. For Big Hark was so angry at Little Hark's forgetting to echo back Merrimeg's own words, and calling back words of his own instead, which was strictly forbidden, that he let go of Merrimeg and turned

round on Little Hark and shook his finger at him and shouted, "Let me! Oxtragob borgs, gooblik!" and boxed Little Hark's ears with all his might and main.

Little Hark broke out crying, and Merrimeg dashed away into the dark at the back of the cave, and ran on faster and faster into the darkness. Pretty soon she heard Big Hark shout out something in his own language, and she knew that he was running after her. So she ran on faster than before, and in a moment she struck against a wall in the dark, and feeling it with her hands she turned a corner and saw something which almost made her stop breathing.

It was a stream of sparkling red fire, running across the ground right in her path.

As she looked at it, an enormous bubble, like a soap bubble, but red-hot and shining like fire, rose from the stream and floated up in the air towards her. She crouched down, and the Fire Bubble floated up to the ceiling and burst with a loud crack and a shower of sparks; and then

another one rose from the stream and floated towards her and broke against the ceiling; and then another and another, one right after the other.

Merrimeg was frightened so that she couldn't move. She didn't dare to go on, and she didn't dare to go back. She heard the voice of Big Hark behind her in the dark, crying out: "Sdig! sdig!" And at that moment she——

Well, she heard another voice, from the other side of the Fire Bubbles, and it said:

"I believe it is, brother, I believe it is."

Merrimeg clapped her hands with joy and cried: "Here I am! Help me! Help me!"

Big Hark's voice behind her echoed her words, "Help me!" and the other voice, on the far side of the Fire Bubbles, said:

"I suppose we'd better help her, brother Nibby."

"I'm quite of your opinion, brother, quite," said the voice of brother Nibby.

"Quite," said Big Hark, in echo, just behind Merrimeg. As he said this he threw his arms

around her and began to drag her back into the cave. Little Hark came running up, and he tugged at his father's coat and said, "Skeems non doogdag, himpotter," which meant, "Please don't hurt her, father."

But he hadn't any more than said these words than Malkin and Nibby, the two gnomes, rushed across the stream of fire, knocking the Fire Bubbles right and left with their hands, and Malkin picked up Little Hark, slung him on his shoulder, and ran back with him across the stream of fire, knocking the Fire Bubbles right and left as he ran.

"Ishkameerz! O ishkameerz!" cried Big Hark, and he let go of Merrimeg and rushed down to the stream of fire, holding out his hands towards the little boy on the other side. But he did not dare go near the fire.

"I believe now maybe he'll give her up," said Malkin from the other side of the fire.

"Give her up!" said Little Hark, struggling on Malkin's shoulder.

"Fee skimble fen bitkin, fee skimble fen

moklin!" shouted Big Hark, which meant, "If you'll give up the boy, I'll give up the maiden!"

"Good!" cried Malkin.

"Good!" said Little Hark.

Nibby the gnome ran to Merrimeg and unfastened the vines that bound her arms, and lifted her up and carried her across the stream of fire, knocking the Fire Bubbles away with his hand, so that she wasn't harmed in the least; and at the same time brother Malkin crossed the stream of fire and put down Little Hark beside his father.

"Hurry! hurry!" cried Merrimeg, and pulled the two gnomes away into the darkness beyond the fire.

"Farewell!" cried Malkin.

"Good-by!" called back Little Hark, and his father shook him by the shoulder and said, "Oxtragob borgs, gooblik!" which meant, as you know, "Wrong again, stupid!"

"Take me home quick," said Merrimeg as she went on between the two gnomes deeper and deeper into the darkness.

"She's not very polite to-day, brother," said Malkin.

"Not very, brother, not very, indeed," said Nibby. "She really ought to say 'Please,' I think."

"Maybe something's happened to bother her," said Malkin.

"Maybe so, maybe so," said Nibby. "I wonder what it could be."

They went down into the earth for a long way, and then they went up under the earth for a long way, and at last they stopped.

"Here we are, brother Nibby," said Malkin, and he appeared to be opening a door.

"Home again, brother Malkin," said Nibby, and the three of them climbed a ladder, and Nibby raised a door overhead, and the next minute they were in the gnomes' kitchen.

Malkin and Nibby sat themselves down at their little table, where a candle was burning, and Malkin said:

"I suppose we'd better ask her to stay to supper, brother."

"Just what I was thinking," said Nibby. "But which one of us will ask her?"

"Oh, *you* must be the one to do that, brother."

"Oh, no, you can do it so much better, brother Malkin. *You* must——"

"Goodness gracious me!" said Merrimeg. "You don't need to ask me. I can't stay anyway."

"Not very polite to-day, brother, not very polite," said Malkin.

"I'm afraid not, brother, I'm afraid not," said Nibby.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Merrimeg. "Please excuse me. I really have to go home. And I'm ever so much obliged to you."

She climbed the ladder to the ceiling and went up through the little door there, and calling down good-by she stepped out onto the roof of the gnomes' house, and closed down the door after her.

She ran as fast as she could through the woods, until she came to the brook where she had left her basket. There it was, full of water cress,

just as she had left it. She snatched it up and ran all the way home.

When she came in at the kitchen door of her house, her mother was rummaging in the cupboard, as if she were looking for something she had lost.

"Well, Merrimeg, you've been a precious long time getting a little basketful of water cress. I've lost my blue saltcellar with the salt in it. Do you think you can find it?"

Merrimeg suddenly found that the saltcellar was no longer in her pocket. She must have lost it somewhere in the woods.

"No, mother," said she.

MERRIMEG AND THE RAG-BONE MAN

MERRIMEG AND THE RAG-BONE MAN

RAGS! bones! old iron!"

Merrimeg put her head out of the front window and looked down the street.

A queer man with a dirty face was coming along, and he was bending down under a heavy sack which he was carrying on his back.

"Rags! bones! old iron!" he cried, and all the children who were playing in the street ran indoors in a fright.

It was the Rag-Bone Man. Everybody said that if you didn't look sharp he'd snatch you up and stuff you in his sack and carry you off and never, never bring you back any more; so all the children in that village were terribly afraid of him, and whenever they saw him coming they simply took to their heels and fled.

"Rags! bones! old iron!" cried the Rag-Bone Man.

"Oh, pshaw," said Merrimeg, "*I'm* not afraid."

She went out into the street and watched him coming. He came on nearer and nearer. He reached the house next door and stopped there and stared at Merrimeg.

"Rags! bones! old iron!" he shouted out, at the top of his voice, and quick as a wink Merrimeg sprang back into the house and banged the door and bolted it and ran to her room and buried her head under the pillows. It was a long time before she came out again.

When she did come out, she didn't go into the street, because the Rag-Bone Man was still there, probably. She went into the cabbage garden, where her mother was hanging up clothes.

"Where are you going, Merrimeg?" said her mother.

"Nowhere," said Merrimeg.

"You'd better go over to Tish's house now. They're expecting you to have supper with them. And don't get your dress soiled, and don't stay too late."

"No'm," said Merrimeg.

"Before you go, take these handkerchiefs and spread them out on the rose bushes in the sun to dry."

"Yes'm," said Merrimeg.

Her mother kissed her, and went into the kitchen; and Merrimeg, carrying the wet handkerchiefs, walked over to the apple orchard, thinking about apples, and forgetting all about the rose bushes. She always liked to eat apples just before meals.

In the orchard she stopped under a tree and reached up towards the lowest branch, and just at that moment she heard the sound of some one crying. It seemed to come from the other side of the tree. She tiptoed around the tree to see who it was.

It was the Rag-Bone Man. He was sitting on the ground, with his back against the tree, and his sack beside him, and he was crying to himself pretty loud, and sniffling and wiping away the tears with the back of his hand.

Merrimeg was so frightened that she could not move.

"Gimme a handkerchief, quick," said the Rag-Bone Man, and he snatched the handkerchiefs out of her hand and put one of them to his nose.

"Oh!" he said, and threw the handkerchiefs down. "They're wet! They won't do! What good is a wet handkerchief? Haven't you got a dry one?"

"No, sir," said Merrimeg, in a shaky little voice.

"Then it's no use," said the Rag-Bone Man. "I reckon I'll have to stop crying. You can't cry without a handkerchief. Why didn't you bring me a dry one?"

"I didn't know you wanted one," said Merrimeg.

"Well, you didn't think I could cry into a wet one, did you? You don't expect me to do that, do you? Do you, or don't you?"

"No, sir," said Merrimeg.

"The next time you come around me when

"GIMME A HANDKERCHIEF QUICK," SAID THE RAG-BONE MAN

I'm crying, you bring me a dry one, d'you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Merrimeg.

"Don't say 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir' all the time. Why don't you ask me what I'm crying about?"

"Yes, sir," said Merrimeg, twisting her apron. "I mean—if you please——"

"I'm crying about—I'm crying about—oh, dear! I'm going to cry again, I *know* I am! And I *never* have any handkerchief!"

He burst into tears again, and Merrimeg began to feel sorry for him.

"Yes, sir?" said she.

He wiped his face with the back of his hand, and smeared the dirt all over it most terribly.

"It's—it's—about the children," he said, crying out louder than before. "I can't—I can't—help it. It's because they—they won't come near me—they're afraid of me—they won't speak to me—they won't let me tell 'em about Rags—they run away from me—oh, it's too hard, it's too hard!"

He sniffled and gulped. Merrimeg felt very sorry for him indeed.

"Please, sir," said she, "do you want——"

"I want a handkerchief. Look in that bag and see if you can find one. Oh, dear! If the children would only let me speak to 'em! Then I could tell 'em all about Rags! Why don't you hurry? Can't you see I need a handkerchief? Will you, or won't you?"

Merrimeg quickly opened the sack. She put her head down into it and looked in; and before she knew what was going on her heels were lifted up and she was plopped down head first into the bag, and there she was, tied up tight inside the rag-bone sack.

She kicked and screamed, but it wasn't any use. The Rag-Bone Man slung the sack on his back and made off through the orchard as fast as he could go.

Merrimeg stopped kicking, when she found it wasn't any use, and after a long time she came down on the ground with a bump, and she heard the Rag-Bone Man call out, "Open the door!"

The sack was untied, and she stood up. She was standing before a little house in the woods, and the trees about it were dark and gloomy, and the sun had gone down.

The door of the little house opened, and a little girl, smaller than Merrimeg, stood in the doorway. She was a very ragged little girl, and her face was dirty and sad. She looked at Merrimeg with big solemn eyes.

"I've brought you one at last!" cried the Rag-Bone Man. "Here she is! I've got one for you at last! Somebody to play with! Here she is, and she's going to stay with you and play with you, and never go home any more! Now we've got her we'll *keep* her. Now you'll have company! Ain't she a pretty one, though? Ain't I a good father? Come in, come on in!"

He seized the two little girls by the hand and ran into the house with them.

It was a tiny house, with only two rooms, one in front and one behind. The Rag-Bone Man began to get out plates and knives and forks and

set them about on a table in the front room. The two little girls stood staring at each other.

"What's your name?" said the Rag-Bone Man's little girl.

"Merrimeg," said she.

"My name is Rags. That's my father. He's been trying for a long, long time to bring me somebody to live with me here and play with me, but they always ran away from him. You're the first. Are you lonely?"

"No," said Merrimeg.

"I am. But I won't be any longer. I've got you to play with me now."

"Can't I—ever—go home—any more?" said Merrimeg.

"Oh, father!" said little Rags. "She wants to go home already!"

"Go home?" cried the Rag-Bone Man. "Are you talking about going home already? Oh, dear, *don't* make me cry again! If you talk like that, I'll cry, I *know* I will! You *can't* leave us! It wouldn't do! No, no! Sit down and eat your supper. Oh, dear, she wants to go home!"

They sat down at the table, but Merrimeg couldn't eat; and after supper Rags and Merrimeg went to bed together in a little bed in the back room. The stars shone in through the window.

"To-morrow," said Rags, pulling the covers up over Merrimeg, "we'll have a grand play in the woods all day. Oh, won't I be happy, though! I know where there's a lot of wild strawberries, and a brook with crawly things on the bottom, and—oh, I'm so glad you've come! And father won't ever let you leave me as long as you live! Oh, isn't it jolly! I'll never be lonely any more!"

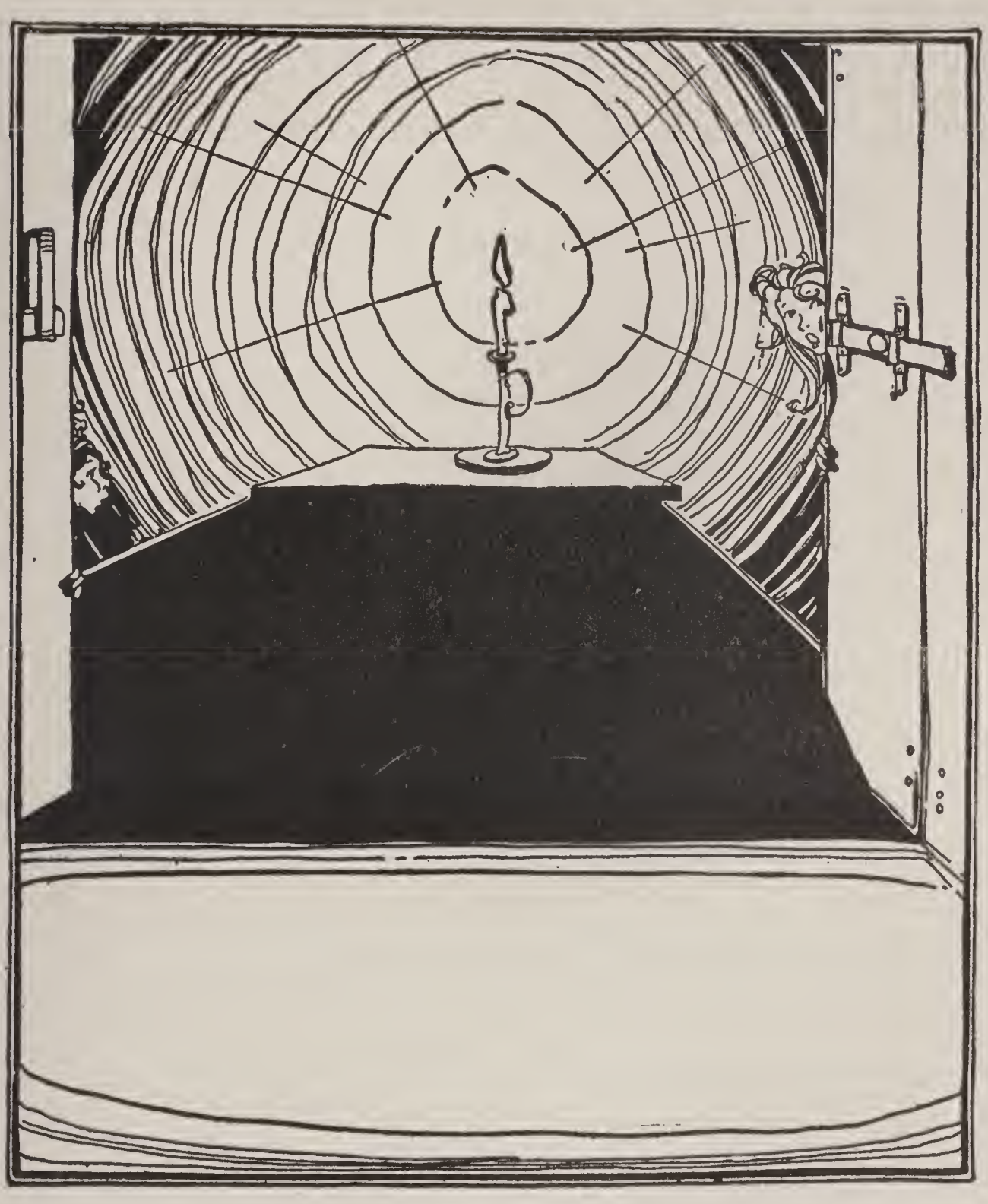
She sighed with happiness, and nestled her head down on the pillow, and went to sleep.

But Merrimeg didn't go to sleep. She thought about her mother, and what would happen if she never went home any more, and how she would miss her mother, and what the other children in the village would say after she'd been away for years and years, and—she sat up in bed. The little house was very still. She made up her

mind that if she was ever going to get home, she had better try to steal away now. She got up quietly and dressed herself, and opened the door of the front room on a crack and peeked in.

A candle was burning on the table in there, and the Rag-Bone Man was over at the other side of the room, opening the drawers of a bureau one after another, and rummaging about inside. He was sniffling dreadfully.

"I can't find 'em," he was saying to himself. "Where are the plaguey handkerchiefs, anyway? To think that after I've tried so hard, and brought one of 'em here at last, she wants to go right away home, before she's been here ten minutes! They're all alike, that's what it is. They don't like me, and they run away from me, and when one of 'em comes here at last she wants to go right off home again. There ain't one of 'em can abide the sight of me, and it's a cruel shame, that's what it is. It's *cruel.* Oh, dear, I'm going to cry again—I just *know* I am—it's coming on—I can feel it—*where* are those handkerchiefs, anyway?"



"I CAN SEE HER PEEKING IN THROUGH THE DOOR."

He opened another drawer, and rummaged about inside, and then sat down on a chair with his head on his hands.

"Plague take it," said he, "I just *know* I'm going to cry. And there's no handkerchiefs in the house. *Why* do they all run away from me? And she wants to go home before she's been here ten minutes, and there's no handkerchiefs in the house—boo-hoo-hoo!"

"I believe he's crying," said a voice outside.

"I believe he is, brother, I believe he is," said another voice.

"How would it do to go in?" said the first voice.

"That's a very clever idea, brother, very clever," said the other voice.

The front door opened, and in walked the two gnomes.

"I believe she's here, too, brother Nibby," said Malkin. "I can see her peeking in through the door."

"Then," said brother Nibby, "I wonder why she doesn't come in?"

"I *will* come in," said Merrimeg. "Oh, but I'm glad you've come!" And she stepped into the room.

"But she wants to go home!" said the Rag-Bone Man, wiping his eyes and nose with the back of his hand. "Have you got a dry handkerchief?"

"Have you got a handkerchief, brother Nibby?" said Malkin.

"Oh dear no," said Nibby. "I always forget it."

"Do you know where you left it, brother?" said Malkin.

"Oh dear yes," said Nibby. "In the ice box under the kitchen sink."

"Then please!" said the Rag-Bone Man. "Please! Take me there and give it to me! Oh, oh! When I think of all the children running away from me, and now she wants to go home, and no handkerchiefs in the house,—I'm going to cry again, I'm going to cry again, I just *know* it!" And sure enough, he began to cry, harder than ever.

"Maybe he'd feel better," said Malkin, "if we took him home and got him a handkerchief."

"Maybe he would, there's something in that," said Nibby.

"Then let's do it," said Malkin.

"But oh, dear!" said the Rag-Bone Man, pointing at Merrimeg. "I can't leave *her* here. She'd run away."

"Then we'd better take her with us, brother Nibby," said Malkin. "What do you say?"

"Just what I was thinking," said Nibby. "You took the words out of my mouth."

"All right," said the Rag-Bone Man. "When I've gotten the handkerchief I'll bring her back again. Now then," said he to Merrimeg, picking up his bag, "jump into the sack. Quick. Will you, or won't you?"

"No, no!" said Merrimeg. "I don't like the sack. I won't!"

"Not very polite to-day, brother Nibby," said Malkin. "I think she ought to do what the gentleman says."

"You're right, brother, you're always right," said Nibby.

"Well," said Merrimeg, "if you say I ought to do it, I will. But I don't want to."

She stepped into the bag, and at that moment

a voice sounded from the back door. "No, no! Don't go away!"

It was little Rags, in her nightgown. She ran to Merrimeg and threw her arms around her and clung to her tight.

"Don't go, don't go!" cried little Rags. "Don't leave me! Stay and play with me! Oh please, oh please!"

"She's coming back," said her father. "I'll bring her back as soon as I get the handkerchief. She'd run away if I left her here. She'll be back."

Merrimeg put her arm around little Rags and kissed her.

"Good-by," said she. "Don't cry. I've got to go now. Don't cry. Good-by."

The Rag-Bone Man pulled the sack up over Merrimeg and hoisted it up on his back.

"Don't go, don't go!" said little Rags, and put her head down on her arm.

The door closed behind the Rag-Bone Man and his sack, and the two gnomes; and little Rags in her nightgown stood all alone in the room, weeping.

The Rag-Bone Man walked so far and so long that Merrimeg fell asleep in the sack. When she woke up she was standing on the mossy roof of the gnomes' house, rubbing her eyes; and in

a moment they were all four going down the ladder into the gnomes' kitchen.

Nibby ran to the ice box under the sink, and put his hand in.

"It's no use, brother, it isn't here," said Nibby.

"Then we'd better look somewhere else, brother," said Malkin.

They looked in the coffeepot, and the bread box, and in the oven, and everywhere; but they couldn't find the handkerchief.

"Oh, dear!" said the Rag-Bone Man. "It's enough to make a person cry his eyes out, that's what it is. Oh, what a day I've had! What are you going to do now?"

"*I'll* tell you," said Merrimeg. "I left a lot of them in the apple orchard at home, and they're all dry by now. Let's go there!"

"Do you think they're dry?" said the Rag-Bone Man.

"Of course they are!" said Merrimeg. "Come along! Hurry!"

She led them up the ladder, and when they

were outside she got into the sack again. The Rag-Bone Man swung her onto his back, and before very long she was dropped to the ground with a bump, and she got out of the sack. They were standing in the apple orchard behind her house, and there on the ground were the handkerchiefs, where the Rag-Bone Man had thrown them.

The Rag-Bone Man picked them up. They were wet.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" he cried. "They're all wet! I *knew* they wouldn't be dry! They're no earthly good! What'll I do? No handkerchiefs, and all the children running away from me, and —Oh, dear! I'm going to cry again! Oh, what a day I've had! What'll I do? What'll I *do?*"

"Bless my soul, brother Nibby," said Malkin. "*I* know where our handkerchief is. I put it there myself. It's in the handkerchief box on the bureau. I wonder why we didn't think to look for it there?"

"I believe you're right, brother," said Nibby.

"It's the last place I would have thought of looking for it."

"Then we'd better take him back to get it before he cries again," said Nibby. "Let's go."

"Oh, dear!" said the Rag-Bone Man. "*Such* a lot of running back and forth in the middle of the night! Come along," he said to Merrimeg, "jump into the sack again, and let's go back. Oh, dear! So much trouble, nothing but trouble! Quick, jump into the sack."

"No, no!" cried Merrimeg, starting to run. "I'm home now. I'm not going back! Good-by!" And she ran away as fast as her feet would carry her, through the apple orchard, across the cabbage garden, and in at the kitchen door.

"Funny how we came to bring her back right to her own home, brother," said Malkin.

"Very funny, very funny indeed," said Nibby.

"Oh! oh! oh!" said the Rag-Bone Man. "What'll my poor little Rags do now? Oh, what a terrible day I've had! Oh, dear! oh, dear!"

He put his head down and burst out crying, and the two gnomes led him away.

In the front room, Merrimeg's mother was sitting at the window sewing.

"Well," she said. "I thought you were never coming home! I told you not to stay at Tish's so late. Did you have a nice supper? Get ready for bed, and next time don't stay so long."

"Yes, mother," said Merrimeg.

MERRIMEG AND THE APPLE-SEED ELF

MERRIMEG AND THE APPLE-SEED ELF

MERRIMEG was sitting in an apple tree in the orchard. She sat there as still as a mouse.

Her mother came to the kitchen door and called: "Merrimeg!"

But Merrimeg sat in the apple tree as quiet as a mouse; and answered never a word.

"Merrimeg!" called her mother. "Where are you?"

Still Merrimeg said nothing. It was not one of her days to be good.

"Come dry the dishes! Come dry the dishes!" called her mother.

But Merrimeg did not want to dry dishes, so she sat in the apple tree among the green leaves and red apples, and said never a word.

Her mother went back into the kitchen, and closed the door behind her.

Then Merrimeg reached out her hand and plucked the biggest and reddest apple near her, and took a great bite out of it.

"Oh, you naughty child!" piped up a little thin squeaking voice. "Are you trying to bite my head off?"

She looked at the apple in her hand, and there, in the place where she had bitten it, was a tiny head with little black eyes.

"Let me out!" cried the voice again. "Suppose you'd bitten my head off, what then, eh?"

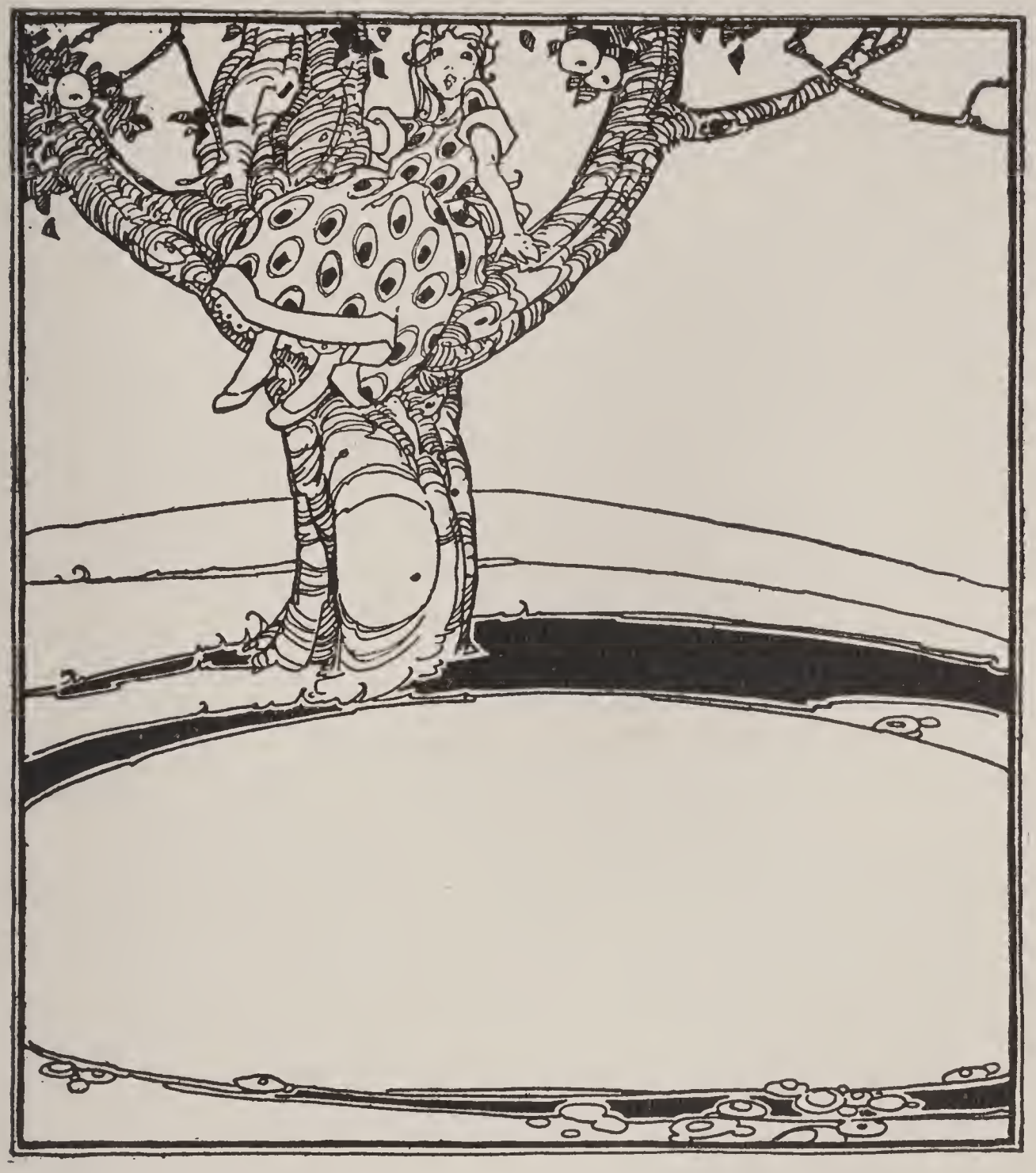
Merrimeg held up the apple and looked close at the tiny head.

"I'm sorry," said she. "How can I let you out?"

"Why, you stupid thing," said the little creature, "*eat* me out, of course!"

"Oh!" said Merrimeg, and she carefully ate all around the outside of the apple, and out came into her hand the tiniest little man in the world, no bigger than an apple core, and dressed in a coat made of apple seeds all fastened together.

"I heard your mother calling you!" said this



MERRIMEG WAS SITTING IN AN APPLE TREE

little elf. "First you won't answer your mother, and then you nearly bite my head off. What do you mean by it?"

"I don't like to dry dishes," said Merrimeg.

"Oh, she doesn't like to dry dishes! Oh, no indeed! She mustn't do anything she doesn't want to do! Not she! I'll tell you what; I suppose you'd like to do nothing all day but eat and be outdoors, and never have to bother about washing and dressing and sweeping and dusting and running errands,—I suppose that's what you'd like?"

"Well," said Merrimeg, "I *would* like it pretty well. I hate to sweep and——"

"All right!" cried the Apple-Seed Elf, and he sprang from her hand onto a branch near her shoulder. "I'll fix it for you! I'll see to it! You'll never have to dress or do any lessons any more,—now then! Caterpillar! Go away, child, and come up, caterpillar! Come up, caterpillar! Come, come, come!"

As he finished saying this, Merrimeg disappeared. There was no little girl sitting on the

branch any longer, but in her place was a fat yellow caterpillar, wriggling along the bark. She was turned into a caterpillar, and she would never have to dress herself or learn any lessons any more.

The Apple-Seed Elf hopped down behind the caterpillar and pushed it with his foot.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he laughed. "No more dishes to dry for you! Ha, ha!"

At that moment a blackbird swooped down over the caterpillar and made a dart at it with his beak and nearly got it. But he missed it, just, and if he hadn't missed it that would surely have been the end of Merrimeg forever.

She wasn't out of danger, however. The blackbird meant to have that caterpillar, and he came back directly, and this time he swooped down straight over it and opened his beak and —— But at that instant he was knocked sideways by something which shot out at him from among the branches.

It was a tiny lady with gauzy wings, a sparkling little lady, not quite so big as the black-

bird, and she darted at the bird with a flash like the flash of diamonds, and knocked him sideways just as he was about to snap up the caterpillar.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the Apple-Seed Elf, still standing on the branch behind the caterpillar. He seemed to be having a thoroughly good time.

The blackbird wasn't going to give up so soon. He dashed at the caterpillar again, and the sparkling little lady dashed at the blackbird; and she knocked him sideways, and he flew off and turned round and came back again. He was the stubbornest blackbird in the world. He came back a dozen times. And each time the sparkling lady, with her wings buzzing like a bumblebee's, knocked him sideways and sent him off. But the thirteenth time she missed him. Just as he was pouncing on the caterpillar she flashed by him, too late. She wheeled around and cried out, "Go away, caterpillar! Come up, butterfly!" And the caterpillar turned instantly into a beautiful butterfly, and the butterfly floated away off the branch just in time.

The blackbird snatched up the Apple-Seed Elf in its beak by the back of his coat, and dashed off with him. The elf screamed and kicked, but it wasn't any use; the blackbird flew off with him out of sight among the trees, and did not come back any more.

Merrimeg was a butterfly, a beautiful butterfly, with pointed wings all white and blue and brown. It fluttered here and there in the sunshine for a moment, then it sailed out from the orchard as if it knew where it was going, and floated off across the cabbage garden to the kitchen window, and in through the kitchen window straight into the kitchen, where Merrimeg's mother was washing the dishes.

"Oh!" said Merrimeg's mother. "What a beautiful butterfly! I must try to catch it for Merrimeg."

The butterfly sailed round the kitchen, and Merrimeg's mother held up her apron and tiptoed after it, and almost caught it, but not quite. It flew off into the front room, and when Merrimeg's mother came in it was resting quietly on

Merrimeg's bed, fluttering its wings. Oh, if that butterfly could only have said one word!

Merrimeg's mother held her apron over it, but it rose in the air, and as she ran after it it flew out of the front window into the street and was gone. Merrimeg's mother went back to her washing in the kitchen.

"I wonder where that Merrimeg is," said she, and she went to the kitchen door and called, "Merrimeg!" But there was no answer, and she turned back into the kitchen again, and threw her hands up and said, "Why, bless me, there's that butterfly again!"

Sure enough, the butterfly was hovering around, here and there, quite as if it could not make up its mind to go away. Merrimeg's mother held up her apron again and tried to catch it; but she only drove it into the front room, and when she followed it there, waving her apron, it flew out of the window into the street.

"Oh, pshaw," she said, "I can't bother with you all day." And she closed the window.

The butterfly rose higher and sailed off down the street in the direction of the woods.

Merrimeg's mother went back to her washing.

Now it happened, after a while, that the two gnomes, brother Malkin and brother Nibby, were sitting on the moss beside the roof of their house, with their back against a tree. A butterfly, with pointed wings all white and blue and brown, came fluttering towards them through the woods.

It alighted on a bush directly before them, and rested there for a long time, waving its wings up and down. The gnomes sat staring at it. Oh, if that butterfly could only have said one word!

Suddenly Malkin looked up at the sky and said:

"What's that blackbird carrying, brother?"

"Why, I believe it's—it's——" began Nibby.

A blackbird was flying just above them, and as they spoke something dropped from its beak right down onto the bush beside the butterfly. It was the Apple-Seed Elf.

"Bless my soul, brother," said Malkin in surprise, but before he could say anything else the Apple-Seed Elf hopped over to the butterfly and rubbed his tiny hands quickly over its beautiful wings, all white and blue and brown.

"Oh, the wicked little villain!" cried Malkin, and the two gnomes made a dash at the Elf; but he skipped away in a hurry, laughing "Ha, ha, ha!" and disappeared from sight under the bush.

The butterfly flapped its wings, trying to fly, but it couldn't. All the powder, the soft delicate powder with its beautiful colors, which covered its wings, was brushed off; and without

this powder on its wings the butterfly could not fly.

The gnomes looked about carefully, and on the leaves of the bush they found the powder, and they dusted it off into an acorn cup. But they didn't know how to put it on again.

"What'll we do about it?" said Nibby.

"We'd better go to the Paint Shop," said Malkin.

"That's a good idea, brother," said Nibby. "I declare you do think of everything."

"Then let's go," said Malkin, and he picked up the poor butterfly gently. It wasn't beautiful any longer, and it couldn't fly.

"I'll carry the powder," said Nibby, and he took the acorn cup in his hands, full of a powder all white and blue and brown, mixed up together.

They made off through the woods as fast as they could. By and by they came to a brook, and on the other side of the brook, among the trees, was a tiny house, with an open door no taller than the gnomes, and over the door was a sign, and it said:

"Butterflies Painted Here."

The gnomes crossed the brook and went in at the little door; and as they did so a big butterfly, gorgeously painted, came flying out.

Inside, in a little room, a little old man with a long white beard and goggle-eyes was sitting behind a little table. On the table before him was row after row of acorn cups, hundreds of them, each one filled with a colored powder, and every color different from all the others. The little old man was a Painter of Butterflies. He dipped a tiny hair brush into one of the cups of powder, and said:

"Wait a minute, please. I've got to finish this wing."

A butterfly was lying on the table before him, all finished except for a spot on one wing; and dozens of other butterflies were waiting their turns on a bench by the wall; these last had no colors on their wings at all.

The Painter of Butterflies touched up the wing before him with an orange-colored powder, and said:

"Now you'll do. Off with you!"

The butterfly fluttered, rose in the air, and sailed out through the door.

"You're next," said the Painter.

Malkin put down his butterfly on the table, and Nibby laid down his cup of powder.

"Aha!" said the Painter. "Let me look at that butterfly! Something queer about that butterfly! Wait a minute!"

He put on a pair of thick shiny spectacles and bent down over the butterfly.

"Aha!" he said. "I thought so! This isn't a butterfly. I ought to know a butterfly when I see one. This is something else entirely. Did you ever see a butterfly with a pink sash?"

He took off his spectacles and gave them to the gnomes, and they looked at the butterfly through the spectacles, one after the other. There, around the butterfly's body, was a thread of pink ribbon, tied with a bow. When they took the spectacles off they couldn't see it any longer.

"Bless my soul, brother Nibby," said Malkin, "I believe it's——"

"I believe it is, brother, I believe it is," said Nibby. "I've seen her wear a pink sash. However did she get changed into a butterfly?"

The little old Painter picked up the acorn cup which Nibby had brought, and looked into it.

"Aha!" he said. "White and blue and brown. She must have had a white skin and blue eyes and brown hair. Wait a minute."

He poured the powder from the cup onto the table, and held his brush over it.

"White, white, come up!" he said; and all the white powder flew up onto the brush. He painted the butterfly's wings with this, so that they became white all over.

"Blue, blue, come up!" he said, and all the blue powder flew up onto the brush. With this he painted a round blue eye on each wing.

"Brown, brown, come up!" he said, and the brown powder flew up on to the brush. With this he painted brown streaks like hair on each wing.

"Now," he said, "fly!"

The butterfly rose and flew around the room, and then settled down on Nibby's shoulder.

"That's done," said the Painter, "now we'd better go and see old Sappy the Owl about it."

He got up, and the two gnomes followed him out of the door, the butterfly coming along on Nibby's shoulder.

They came, after a while, to a great hollow oak tree in the woods, and the Painter stuck his head into a hole at the bottom of the tree and shouted up inside: "Sappy! Come down!" Then he stood up, and in a moment a large gray owl was standing in the opening at the bottom of the tree.

"Here's a butterfly with a pink sash," said the Painter.

"We'd better tell him, brother," said Malkin, "about the Elf with the apple-seed coat, who brushed all the powder off the butterfly's wings."

"Suppose you tell him, brother," said Nibby. But Sappy didn't wait to be told; he had evi-

THE TWO GNOMES FOLLOWED HIM OUT OF THE DOOR

dently heard all he needed to hear. He gave a slow wink with one eye, ruffled his feathers, and flew away among the trees without a word.

"He'll be back," said the Painter, and in a little while old Sappy came back, and he was carrying in his beak the Apple-Seed Elf.

"Let me go!" cried the Elf, kicking and squirming, and owl dropped him to the ground and stood over him.

"What do you want?" piped the Elf, evidently frightened almost to death.

"Say the words!" growled the owl, in a deep hoarse voice. "Say the words that'll change the butterfly back again, and say 'em before I count ten, or else I'll eat you. One, two, three, four, ——"

The Apple-Seed Elf started to scamper off through the grass, but the owl put his foot on him, quick as a wink.

"Five, six, seven, ——"

"Let me go!" cried the Elf, struggling to get loose.

"Eight, nine, ——"

"Go away, butterfly!" cried the Elf, in his shrill voice. "Come up, child! Go away, butterfly! Come up, child!"

The minute he had said this, Nibby cried out, "My stars, brother, here's a go!" And there, on Nibby's shoulder, in place of the butterfly, sat Merrimeg herself, with her feet dangling to the ground.

"Let me go!" screamed the Apple-Seed Elf, and Sappy the Owl gave him a kick with his foot and sent him off scampering through the grass.

"I believe she's here, brother," said Malkin.

"I'm sure of it, brother, I'm sure of it," said Nibby, as Merrimeg slipped from his shoulder and stood on her feet.

"Take me home!" said Merrimeg. "Take me home quick! Don't stand there all day, I want to go home!"

"Not very polite to-day, brother Nibby," said Malkin.

"Not very, indeed," said Nibby.

"Excuse me," said Merrimeg, "but my

mother's been calling me, and I mustn't keep her waiting."

"Well," said the little old Painter of Butterflies, "I guess I'd better get back to my work."

"Why don't you go, then?" growled Sappy the Owl.

"I *must* go," said Merrimeg. "Mother wants me to help her with the dishes, and there's some sweeping to be done, too, and——"

"Come along, brother," said Malkin, and the two gnomes led Merrimeg away in the direction of their house.

When they reached it, Merrimeg thanked them, very politely, and ran away home; and when she opened the kitchen door her mother was peeling the potatoes for supper.

"Why, Merrimeg!" said her mother. "Wherever have you been? I've been looking for you everywhere. Will you sit down and finish peeling these potatoes for me?"

"Yes, mother," said Merrimeg.

MERRIMEG AND THE MAY-DEW

MERRIMEG AND THE MAY-DEW

DON'T be long,'' said Merrimeg's mother.

''No, mother,'' said Merrimeg, and she ran off down the village street, into the woods.

It was May-day, and she was going May-dewing. You know if you wash your face with dew, early on May-morning, it will keep you fair and sweet to look on, almost forever. That is what she was going to do.

She didn't do it at once, however, because she had to run after a good many rabbits and squirrels. She stopped out of breath beside a pretty little brook, and then she bethought herself that she hadn't yet washed her face with May-dew. The woods were all about her, and the brook was dropping down over its stones between moss and ferns. It was singing a little song to itself. Merrimeg stopped to listen. She dipped her bare foot in the water, and as she did so she noticed

that there was a waterfall, quite a tall one, a little way up the stream, pouring down smoothly into a pool.

She thought she might as well wash her face now with dew, and she stooped down. At that moment the song of the brook became quite loud, and she looked up in surprise. From the pool at the bottom of the waterfall a head was looking out at her, the head of a little girl.

The head nodded at her. Merrimeg stared with both eyes. The head rose up, and the next moment the little girl that it belonged to was standing in shallow water to her knees. She was singing. She was making precisely the same sound as the brook itself, only louder.

She was smaller than Merrimeg. If she hadn't been so pale, she would have been very pretty indeed. What looked like the stubs of two wings stuck out a trifle from her shoulder-blades. Her little slim body was glistening wet.

She stopped singing, and the instant she did so the brook stopped singing too. It positively fell silent as a pond.

"I know who you are," said the little girl. "You're Merrimeg."

"Are you—?" said Merrimeg. "Are you a—?"

"Yes, of course. I live under the waterfall. I'm Myrma. I'm the fairy of this brook. I'm the one that makes it sound as if the brook was singing. You know the brook can't sing, really; it's me. Do you want to hear me do it?"

Merrimeg said "Yes," and came closer to her. Myrma the fairy opened her mouth, and the sound she made was exactly the little song of a brook, and it seemed to come from the brook itself. She stopped, and the brook was silent again.

"It's terribly tiresome," said Myrma, "but I only have to do it when there's somebody around to hear it. You don't think the brook sings *all* the time, do you?"

"I didn't know," said Merrimeg.

"When there's nobody to hear it, what's the use? But I'm supposed to keep it up as long as there's anybody around. Oh, dear, I get so

tired hiding away behind the waterfall when people come. I just couldn't help coming out to see you. Do you like me?"

"Yes," said Merrimeg.

"I like you too. Would you—do you think you could—kiss me?"

Merrimeg waded in to her and kissed her on the cheek. She gave a great sigh.

"Now you've made me warm all over. I wish you'd stay with me. I can show you things, lots of things. Wouldn't you like to see them?"

"What kind of things?"

"Oh, all kinds. But you haven't washed your face with May-dew yet, have you?"

"No."

"Because that would spoil it. Give me your hand, and I'll take you back there behind the waterfall."

"Oh," said Merrimeg. "I couldn't—I—"

"Come along. Back of the waterfall I'll show you lots of things. Hold my hand tight. That's right. Here we go."

She pulled Merrimeg along to the waterfall.

"Stoop down," she said, and pulled Merrimeg head-foremost into it. The water pounded on Merrimeg's back, and she gasped for breath. The next moment she was through on the other side.

"Oh!" she cried. "I mustn't! I must go back!"

"Please do come along with me," said Myrma, and held her hand tight.

It was pitch dark. Merrimeg was rather frightened, but she was very curious too. She let herself be led onward, and in a few moments they began to go down hill. For a long, long time they walked down hill, in the pitch dark. The way became steeper and steeper. "I'm afraid," whispered Merrimeg. "Why, it's perfectly safe," said Myrma. "I only hope nobody'll come to the brook while I'm away."

They were deep, deep down in the earth when they stopped. Myrma seemed to push against something, and in a moment a door opened, and she drew Merrimeg through.

On the other side—really, it didn't seem pos-

sible there could be such a place, so deep underground. It was a long and beautiful valley, with a blue roof high overhead, exactly like the sky. A road ran down the valley between meadows all spangled with daisies and buttercups. The light that spread everywhere was the soft light of early morning. Here and there in the meadows were blossoming trees, a lovely mass of pink and white. The scent of honeysuckle came on the cool breeze.

"Isn't it lovely!" said Merrimeg.

"Of course," said Myrma. "It's always lovely in springtime. I think he'll be here in a minute."

"Who?" said Merrimeg.

"Old Porringer. He runs the stage-coach. He ought to be here by this time—Here he comes!"

Down the road came a little glass coach, drawn by a pair of tiny white ponies. On the coachman's seat was a little old man with a white beard. "Whoa!" he piped up, and drew in the ponies. Merrimeg laughed at the sight of this

little coach, made all of glass, and the cunning little ponies, and the funny little old coachman.

"Anything to laugh at?" said the old coachman, sitting up straight.

"Never mind, Porringer," said Myrma. "We want to take a trip with you."

"Where do you want to stop?" said Old Porringer.

"At number fifteen, number thirty-five, and number eighty," said Myrma.

"Jump in then," said Old Porringer, and flourished his little whip.

Myrma opened the door of the glass coach, and the two little girls got in and sat down. The ponies pranced, the coachman touched them up with his whip, and away they went at a smart trot down the road. Merrimeg laughed with glee.

"*Now* aren't you glad you came with me?" said Myrma.

"Do you suppose he'd let us drive the ponies?" said Merrimeg.

"Oh no," said Myrma. "He has to be very

careful. There are bad creatures along the road, and they try to break the glass, and he has to watch out for them. If they break it to pieces before he gets to the end of the road, it'll be a bad thing for you. They do, sometimes. You never can tell."

"Oh!" said Merrimeg, a little alarmed.

"All you have to do is to have a good time, and leave it to him. He always has to start out each time with a new coach, because the old one is broken to pieces by the time he gets to the end of the road. But the less you think about it the better. Just look at those buttercups in the meadow! I know how to tell whether you like butter."

The coach sped merrily along, and the little girls chattered gaily. Once there sprang up beside the road an ugly little imp with big ears, who threw a stone after them; but Old Porringer whipped up the ponies, and the stone missed the coach. The little girls laughed.

Merrimeg grew drowsy after a while, with the easy motion of the coach and the soft spring air,

and at last she put her head back and went to sleep. She was awakened once by the sound of breaking glass, and she found that a stone had come through a corner of the coach; but it didn't seem to matter, and she went to sleep again.

The next thing she knew, Myrma was shaking her arm. "We're going to stop now," said Myrma, and Merrimeg sat up and rubbed her eyes.

She found she was looking into a mirror, which she hadn't noticed before, hanging opposite her in the coach. She saw herself in it. She was a grown girl, seemingly about fifteen years old, and her hair was done in a pigtail, and her dress was down to her ankles. She was carrying school-books in her arm.

She wasn't the least bit surprised, strange to say. It seemed as if she had always been as old as that. She didn't realize that it must have been years and years since she started on this journey. Could she have been asleep all that time? However, all she was thinking about was, that if you multiplied $a + b$ by $a - b$, what was

the answer? She was about to open one of her school books, when the coach stopped, and they got out before a large building which had a sign on it with the number "15."

Boys and girls of her own age were going into this building. Myrma followed her in, but Merrimeg quite forgot about her companion. She seemed to know exactly what to do. She walked down a hall and into a schoolroom, and sat down at a desk. Other boys and girls were at their desks, and the teacher, a tall lady with spectacles, was writing with chalk on a blackboard.

Merrimeg felt a tug at her pigtail, and she turned round quickly. The boy at the desk behind her was gazing hard at a book in his hand. He was a jolly-looking boy.

"Did you pull my hair, Peter Prawn?" she said to him, in great indignation.

The boy looked up innocently. "Who, me?" he said.

"Yes, you," she said. "If you do that once more, I'll—I'll— You're just horrid, and I

wish you wouldn't ever speak to me again. So there."

Master Peter laughed, and this made her angrier still. But she couldn't help thinking what a jolly laugh it was.

"Order!" said the teacher. "The class in algebra will come to order. Answer to your names as I call the roll."

Chalk, blackboard, $a + b$, $x - y$, teacher handing out papers, boys playing tricks, girls passing notes,—all this dragged on forever and forever, and there didn't seem to be any hope of ever getting out; but a bell rang at last, and school was over.

The glass coach was waiting outside. Merrimeg noticed that it was broken in several places. Myrma took her hand, and they sat down inside the coach. Old Porringer touched up his ponies, and away they ran, faster than before.

"What's the matter with your hair?" said Myrma.

Merrimeg looked at the end of her pigtail, and it was all green.

"Oh, it's that horrid boy," she said. "He's dipped it in his ink-well. I'll never never speak to him again."

The ponies trotted much faster down the valley now. The blossoms had dropped from the trees, and the air was warmer and the light brighter. Merrimeg yawned and closed her eyes. "I think I'll take a little nap," she said.

When she woke up, the mirror was before her again, and she looked at herself in it. She was a grown woman. Her hair was coiled at the back of her head. She was tall and slender, and her head nearly touched the roof of the coach. She looked as if she might have been about thirty-five years old. Myrma looked very tiny beside her. The coach was badly broken, in many places.

"Now we're going to get out," said Myrma, and the coach stopped before a pretty little cottage covered with vines. Over the door was the number, "35."

"I'll wait for you here," said Myrma, and

Merrimeg gathered up her skirts and ran to the cottage door.

"Peter!" she cried; and the door opened, and a jolly-looking young man, of about her own age, opened the door and took her into his arms. He had very nice laughing eyes.

"Dearest!" he said.

"Oh, Peter!" she said. "Is he better now?"

"Yes, darling, it's only measles. Nothing to worry about."

"Mother! Mother!" came two voices from inside, and a boy of ten and a girl of seven ran out and threw their arms about her. She kissed them both, and they all went in together.

A little boy of three or four was lying in his crib, in a darkened room, and she leaned over him and squeezed his hot little hand.

"Mother," he said, "I want a drink of water."

"You shall have it, darling," she said; but Peter, her husband, had already gone for it, and when he brought it, she said to him:

"Now, Peter, you and the children must stay

out of this room. Has Maggie brought the clean sheets yet?"

"She never does," said Peter, "not unless you go after them first."

"Then I'll just go and get them; and remember to keep the children out of here while I'm gone."

"Hadn't I better go for you?"

"No, I want to see her about the napkins too. I won't be long."

She kissed him, and patted the little boy in the crib, and waved good-bye to the other two children, and ran out to the coach.

"Good-bye, dear little family!" she cried, and got into the coach. "I'll be back directly!"

Old Porringer touched up his ponies, and they bounded away.

"I'll tell him where to stop," said Merrimeg to Myrma. "I wonder why it is that washerwomen are always so unreliable."

It was very hot in the valley now. The weeds by the roadside were tall, and bees were buzzing over the clover in the fields. It was midsummer.

The valley was narrower than before; hills were rising more abruptly on either side. The ponies ran faster and faster.

"It does get so hot here in the summer," said Merrimeg. "It's very trying for the children, especially when they're sick." She yawned. "I've been up so much lately with the baby. But I mustn't go to sleep." She closed her eyes, just to keep the light out; the motion of the coach was very soothing; her head fell forward on her breast; she was sound asleep.

She must have slept a long, long while. She awoke with a shiver. It was snowing. The glass coach was broken, almost to pieces. The cold wind blew the snow in upon her. It was growing dark, but she could make out that high and gloomy mountains hemmed in the road closer and closer on each side. The ponies sped so swiftly that they seemed to be flying.

She looked at herself in the mirror opposite. She was old, very old. Her face was wrinkled, but there was something sweet about it, too. Her hair was snow-white, brushed smoothly

from a part in the middle. Her hands were knotted and trembling, and they rested together on the head of a cane. She wore a dress of plain black silk, with lace about the neck. She was quite small and bent. How many years she must have been asleep in the coach! But she didn't think of that.

"We're nearly at the end of the road," said Myrma.

"Yes, yes, my child," said Merrimeg. "It's good to be there at last."

"We have to pass the giant, and then we'll be safe," said Myrma.

As she said this, a great dark figure rose up beside the road, and hurled with both hands a mighty rock straight at the coach. The mirror and all the front of the coach were struck into a thousand splinters. Merrimeg laughed gently. "Nothing can harm me," she said.

"That's the last," said Myrma. "Now we've escaped them all. We'll get to the end of the road in safety."

"I can't help thinking," said the old lady,

"that it's rather a frail coach for such a hard journey. It really ought to be made of iron." She smiled, as though she were alluding to the mistake of a careless child. It was plain that she was not at all unhappy about it.

The coach stopped. A great wall of rock rose up darkly, just ahead. It was the end of the road.

They stepped out onto the snowy ground, and Merrimeg turned round to say good-bye. The old coachman touched his cap with his whip. The ponies arched their necks and bowed and pawed the ground. There was nothing left of the coach's body except the seats.

Myrma took the old lady's hand, and pointed towards a lighted window which glowed in the darkness.

"Yes, I know," said Merrimeg.

They stood before an old, old house, with a knocker on the door. Over the knocker was the number "80."

"Come in," said Myrma, and she opened the door.

Inside was a warm and cosy room. Candles were glimmering on a polished table, and a fire was sparkling on the open hearth. A grandfather's clock was going tick-tock in the corner.

Merrimeg gave a sigh of contentment. She sat down in an easy chair before the fire, and sat there nodding her head at it and smiling to herself. Her cane was resting against her knee. Her old hands were folded in her lap.

"Bring them in," she said, and Myrma went out through a rear door.

In a moment there were children's voices in the room, crying "Grandmother!" and half a dozen boys and girls, big and little, were sitting round her on the floor, looking up at her fondly. She laid her hand on the head of the littlest, and smoothed his curls. But she kept nodding at the fire all the while, as if her thoughts were far off.

"Mother," said some grownup voices, and two young men and a young woman stood beside her, leaning down to her fondly. Still she kept smil-

ing at the fire, as if she were thinking of something else.

"It's time for Peter to come," she said in a low voice, as if to herself. "He ought to be with me now."

The grownups looked at each other and shook their heads.

"I remember," she said, "how he used to tease me in school. Once he dipped my hair in the green ink. Well, well. I used to get very angry with him. But I think I was only pretending."

Her head sank down a little on her breast.

"He had such nice laughing eyes when he was a boy. I suppose that's what made me love him first."

She folded her hands again in her lap, and her head sank lower on her breast.

"There's no need to worry about the baby, Peter. I'll sit up with him to-night. You must go to bed now. You won't be fit for anything to-morrow if you don't."

Her voice was not more than a whisper now.

"No, I'm not sorry about anything. Every-

thing's been all right. I've had you, and that's enough. No, you mustn't say that. Trouble? Yes, but love makes even that beautiful too."

She raised her head and gazed into the fire, and then closed her eyes.

"He'll be here in time. He won't leave me at the end of the road alone. I'm there now, Peter. Yes. I do see you. It's all right now."

Her head began to droop down, little by little, onto her breast; and as it was sinking, sinking, a new voice sounded in the room, and it said:

"I believe it is, brother, I believe it is."

"You're always right, brother," said another voice.

"Have you got the May-dew?" said the first voice.

"Right here, in the little bottle."

"Then pour it out in my hand."

It was Malkin and Nibby, the gnomes, and brother Nibby was holding out a little bottle filled with what looked like water. He poured out a little into the hollow of brother Malkin's

"HAVE YOU GOT THE MAY-DEW?"

hand. Brother Malkin rubbed it gently on the old lady's cheek.

As he did so, all the others faded away out of sight, and left the gnomes and Merrimeg alone in the room.

Brother Nibby poured out more of the May-dew into brother Malkin's hand, and Malkin rubbed it gently over the poor wrinkled old face. The face began to take on color, and the wrinkles began to disappear.

"More, brother," said Malkin.

In another moment the May-dew was all used up. The instant it was gone—well, Merrimeg herself, a little girl, her own little self, rosy-cheeked, barefoot, lively as a lark, was sitting in the chair before the fire. She jumped down and cried out:

"What have you been doing to me, you naughty gnomes?"

"Rather cross to-day," said Malkin.

"No, please, tell me! I'm sorry," said Merrimeg.

"You tell her," said Malkin.

"I think you're the one to tell her, brother," said Nibby. "You're so—"

"What did you have in that bottle?" said Merrimeg, rather impatiently.

"I thought she knew we had May-dew in it," said Malkin.

"Yes, I certainly thought she knew that," said Nibby.

"Have you been washing my face with May-dew?" said Merrimeg.

"I should think she'd know that without being told; wouldn't you, brother Nibby?" said Malkin.

"I should certainly think so, if you ask me," said Nibby.

"Then let's start home at once!" cried Merrimeg. "Mother will be worried if I'm later than usual. Come along!"

Through the rear door they found their way to a cave in the mountain, and at the end of this cave they found an underground stream, and beside this stream they found the gnomes' canoe. They were in it in a jiffy, and in another jiffy

the gnomes were paddling up stream for dear life.

"Here we are," said Malkin at last, and they got out at the bottom of a ladder that climbed the wall of their tunnel. At the top of the ladder Malkin pushed open a trapdoor, and they all went up through the opening into the gnomes' kitchen.

"I suppose we ought to invite her to stay and rest," said Malkin.

"Just what I was going to say, if you hadn't taken the words out of my mouth," said Nibby. "Suppose you—"

"Oh no, thank you, I can't," said Merrimeg. "But I'm ever so much obliged to you, just the same, and now I've got to run home in a hurry."

"Quite polite, after all, brother," said Malkin.

"Just what I was thinking," said Nibby.

"Good-bye!" cried Merrimeg, and went up the ladder to the trapdoor in the ceiling and out into the world. The sun was shining and the squirrels were scampering up the trees and the birds were singing and— Away she flew as fast as

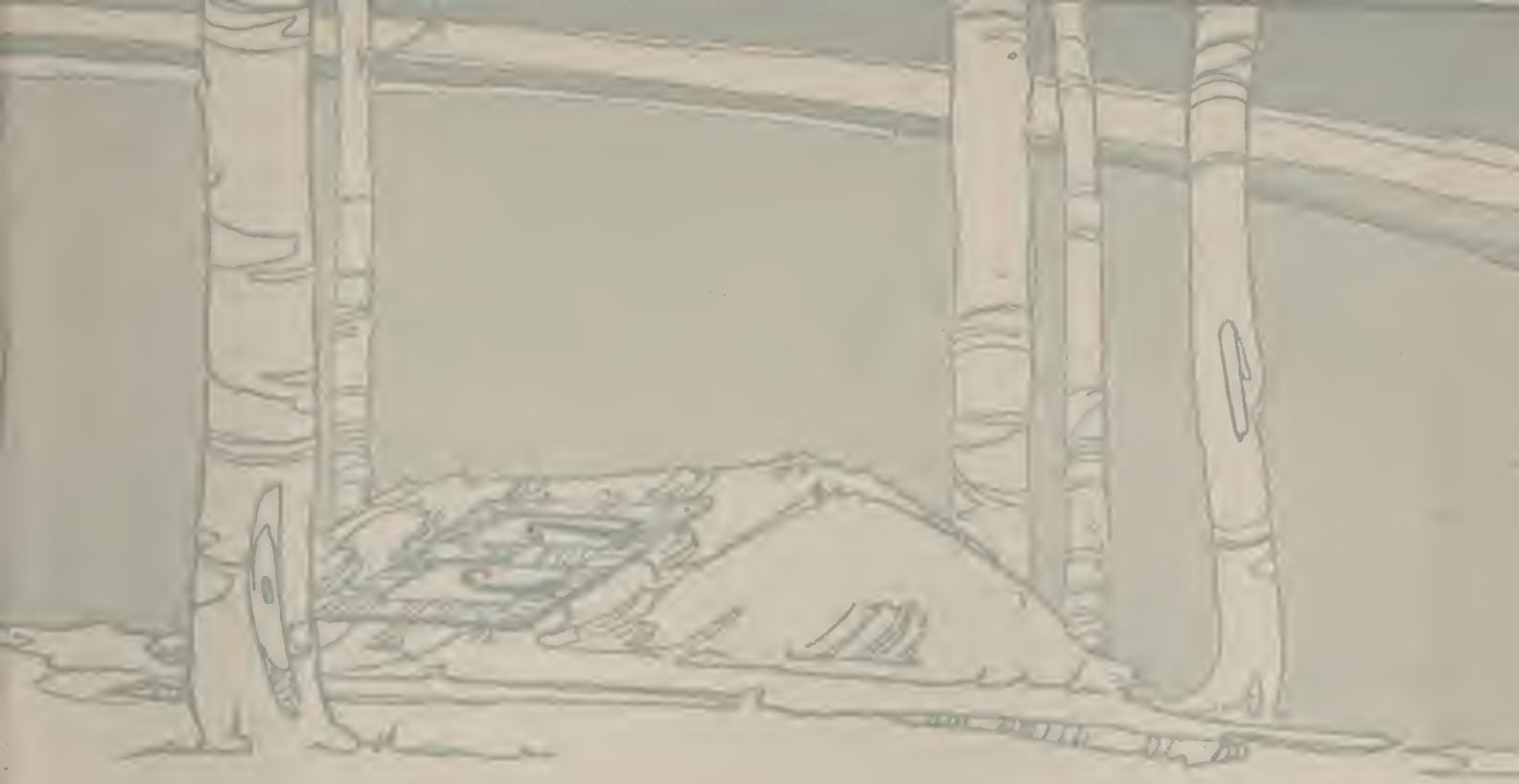
her feet would carry her, through the woods and down the village street and in at the back door of her own house.

"Well!" said her mother, taking her hands out of the dough. "You must have gone to the end of the word and back!"

"Yes'm," said Merrimeg.

"Did you get your face washed with May-dew?"

"Yes, mother," said Merrimeg.



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